

MONUMENTS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE PAST  
IN EARLY HISTORIC IRELAND

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"Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away."

For Norma and Jim

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## ABBREVIATIONS

AClon	<i>Annals of Clonmacnoise</i>
ACM	Armagh County Museum (followed by accession number of artefact)
AFM	<i>Annals of the Four Masters</i>
AI	<i>Annals of Inisfallen</i>
ALC	<i>Annals of Loch Cé</i>
AU	<i>Annals of Ulster</i>
am	<i>anno mundi</i>
BM	British Museum (followed by accession number)
Co	County
IGR	Irish Grid Reference (followed by letter prefix and grid co-ordinates)
ob	<i>obit</i>
sa	<i>sub anno</i>

## SUMMARY

This thesis concerns the manner in which the monumental remains of earlier human activity within the Irish landscape were perceived and invested with meaning and value during the early historic period. This period is defined here as comprising the sixth to eleventh centuries AD. That some monuments were regarded as significant during the early historic period is indicated by the prominence which they are accorded in epic literature and topographical lore, their recording in annalistic compilations as the sites of battles and assemblies, and their spatial proximity to - or even incorporation within - ecclesiastical or royal sites.

It is the investment of meaning and value in some monuments which forms the basis of those constructions of the past which are studied here. Constructions of the past comprise a "mytho-history" which is of contemporary relevance within the early historic period. They purport to relate, for instance, the foundation and occupation of monuments at an earlier date in a manner which may be used to promote the aspirations of those individuals or groups who were associated - through their the practising of rituals or royal activities - with that monument during the early historic period. For example, kings seek to establish the

legitimacy and demonstrate the unchallengeable nature of their office and authority partly through their association with monuments whose constructed pasts seek to establish the immemorial antiquity of the monument and its royal links. A similar phenomenon may be observed in the case of ecclesiastical sites whose foundation and the establishment of its main physical elements, especially the principal church and the ecclesiastical boundary, are attributed to divine agency and/or to a saint who is the focus of a powerful cult following at a later date. Some constructed pasts also incorporate an element of cosmology - the spatial and temporal ordering of the (conceptual) cosmos. As the embodiment of a natural, and therefore unchallengeable, order, cosmology constitutes a further means by which socio-political or ecclesiastical elites may demonstrate the legitimacy of their authority and further their aspirations.

This thesis concerns an aspect of ideology within early historic Ireland, specific examples of those constructed bodies of knowledge which were employed in the legitimation and advancement of socio-political aspirations. It concentrates on two main examples, one secular, the other ecclesiastical. The secular example is the so-called royal centres of early Ireland, large earthwork enclosures within concentrations of monuments which feature prominently in a range of literary genres and have also been the focus of archaeological examination. These monuments are traditionally associated with the highest level of kingship in early historic Ireland, and their study provides a potential insight on such wider themes as the nature of royal authority, political organization and centralization. One monument - Navan Fort - is considered in greater detail because it features



particularly prominently in mythological sources and has been the subject of extensive excavation, posing specific problems of interpretation relating to its date, function and wider significance. The ecclesiastical example which is examined is that of Armagh. This is also the subject of mythological literature, in the form of hagiography, but differs from the royal centres in that it is not a monument which belongs to the past, but an ecclesiastical settlement whose constituent elements - churches, boundaries and spatial sub-divisions - belong to the past and embody a cosmological symbolism. The historical context of Armagh's spatial organization and the ideological implications of its cosmological symbolism are examined as a means of understanding the strategies by which Armagh sought to establish its ecclesiastical primacy within early historic Ireland.

Lastly, some of the wider implications of this research are considered. These include the universal nature of constructions of the past - that all pasts are not objectively known, but constructed within specific socio-political and historical contexts, and often with specific aspirations in mind. This potentially presents problems for the manner in which the past is studied and understood, what sources are employed in the study of the past, and how the results of that study and their significance are conveyed to a wider audience. Such considerations potentially enable a greater critical awareness to be achieved in the study and interpretation of the past. In addition, the study of this phenomenon - the construction of the past, and in particular those pasts which were constructed around monuments - is proposed as a means of furthering our knowledge not only of specific processes relating to early historic Ireland, such as political

centralization, the growth in power of the Church, and the nature of the relationship between secular and ecclesiastical authority, but also as an avenue of inquiry in the study of other areas and periods, including prehistoric ones.

CHAPTER 1  
INTRODUCTION: ARCHAEOLOGY, HISTORY,  
MONUMENTS AND MYTHOLOGY

Several processes distinguish Irish society of the latter half of the first millennium AD from that of earlier periods. These processes resulted in the emergence of distinctive forms of social and political organization. This period, for example, saw the emergence of an increasingly hierarchical and centralized social organization, which is attested, albeit idealistically, in the proliferation of social ranks recorded in the seventh and eighth century laws of status (trans MacNeill 1923; ed Binchy 1941; 1978,5:1590-1618). It also saw the eclipse of that elemental political unit of early Ireland, the *tuath*, or petty kingdom (MacNeill 1911:88-102; 1935:94-6; Binchy 1954:54; 1970:4-8; Byrne 1971; 1973:7-8; MacNiocaill 1972:29-30,44-5; Scott 1973) and the emergence of more powerful regional over-kingdoms and dynasties (Binchy 1970:31-46; MacNiocaill 1972:1-42; Byrne 1973). These processes of political centralization resulted in the eventual emergence of a *de facto* high-kingship of Ireland under Brian Boruma (ob 1014), as opposed to the largely titular nature of the high-kingship during the preceding half-millennium (Byrne 1969; 1973:254-74).



In addition, the mid-first millennium AD also saw the conversion of Ireland to Christianity (Carney 1954; Binchy 1962a; Bieler 1964; 1968; Hughes 1966:25-35). By the seventh or eighth centuries, the Church as an institutional body was firmly established in Ireland, and, in the case of several of the more influential monastic foundations, was capable of wielding considerable political power in its own right. The conversion to Christianity is associated with several other features which distinguish the latter half of the first millennium AD from the earlier half. One of the most significant of these is literacy, a fundamental form of knowledge for what is, after all, a religion of the book.

However, those features which distinguish Irish society of the latter half of the first millennium AD from the preceding, Iron Age, society are not isolated. For instance, those processes of political centralization which resulted in the emergence of a comparatively small number of powerful dynasties and provincial over-kingships may also have been responsible for the erosion of the autonomy of the *tuatha*: "... it has been suggested that the rise of great dynasties such as the Eoganacht and Uí Neill and their expansion in the sixth and seventh centuries undermined the old system based on the *tuath*" (Ó Corráin 1978: 9; cf Binchy 1970:34-40; Charles-Edwards 1972:117-22; Ó Corráin 1972:29-32; Wormald 1986:165). The establishment of close links between certain dynasties or over-kingships and ecclesiastical foundations, such as *Cenél nEógain* and Armagh (pp 348,351-2,361), may have been a symbiotic relationship which fostered the political fortunes of both parties (Hughes 1966:68,76). Also, the introduction of literacy, and its control by a learned elite, may have aided those processes of expanding ecclesiastical authority and political centralization by promoting,

through the propagation and dissemination of the written word, the extension of relations of power beyond the immediate limits of kinship (cf Driscoll 1988a:169; pp 30,167, below).

These processes, therefore, are not contingent, but, being interconnected, serve to distinguish a society which, whilst having its origins in the preceding period, was still markedly different in character from earlier society. It is during the latter half of the first millennium AD that the first contemporary historical records in Ireland were produced, another consequence of the introduction of literacy. It is, therefore, both convenient and justifiable to refer to this period as the early historic period. It should be emphasized, however, that this terminology does not reflect merely a change in the generation of evidence - the transition from a prehistoric period to an historic one - which is occasioned by the advent of literacy. Rather, this period is also characterized by those processes of social evolution (ie the extension of the ranked hierarchy), political centralization and religious change which are mentioned above (pp 1-2). Indeed, one of the alternative names which is sometimes applied to this period is "early Christian" (eg de Paor and de Paor 1958; Thomas 1971; Hughes 1972), although this may be criticized on the grounds that it refers to only one aspect of society during the period concerned, that of religious belief.

It is only to be expected that historians, as result of their dependence on written sources, should define chronological periods on the basis of the presence or absence of textual sources. This is explicit in seminal studies such as Hughes' *Early Christian Ireland: an Introduction to the Sources* (1972). The use of this period division is



also widely used by archaeologists, partly out of convenience, but also because - as Driscoll and Níeke (1988a:3) note - for many archaeologists of historic periods, their subjects of enquiry are defined by textual sources. However, the distinction between a prehistoric and an early historic period may also be manifested in some aspects of the archaeological record. One of the major components of the archaeological record of the late Bronze Age and Iron Age (which may be termed here collectively as "later prehistory") in Ireland is deposits of artefacts, most usually in bogs, lochs or rivers. These deposits may include weaponry, decorative metalwork, tools and cauldrons, although this may reflect the better preservation, easier discovery and retrieval, and greater appeal to antiquarians and collectors of such artefacts. One of the best known and most spectacular examples of such a deposit is that of four Iron Age bronze horns, only one of which now survives, from Loughnashade, Co Armagh (Browne 1802; Stuart 1819; Raftery 1983:239-40, no 781, figs 201-2; 1984:138-9; 1987; p 238, below).

Some deposits are associated with earlier funerary monuments. These range in date from the late Bronze Age swords which appear to have been found in passage tombs at Drumagorgan, Co Antrim (Herity 1974:220), and Barnasrahy, Co Sligo (Petrie, in Stokes 1868:243-53; Wood-Martin 1886: 84-5; Herity 1974:271), to deposits of Roman coins and jewellery in front of the entrance to the passage tomb of Newgrange, Co Meath (Topp 1955; Carson and O'Kelly 1977; O'Kelly, C. 1982:42-7). Hoards of late Roman coins and silver bullion are also known, most notably those from Ballinrees, Co Antrim (Bateson 1973:42-3, 63-4, and refs) and Balline, Co Limerick (ibid:73-4, and refs) respectively. The dates of several Roman coins from secure archaeological contexts in Ireland, such as the

*solidus* of Arcadius, the latest coin from Newgrange, which dates to AD 383-387 (Carson and O'Kelly 1977:40), indicates that the practice of artefactual deposition continued into the late fourth or fifth century.

After the fifth century, however, the archaeological record seems to change, with little in the way of deliberate deposits appearing to enter the archaeological record. There are, of course, exceptions, such as the chalice and other items from Ardagh (Dunraven 1874; Gogan 1932; Ryan 1984:139-40) and the chalice and other liturgical vessels from Derrynaflan (Ryan 1983; 1984; 1989a), both in Co Limerick. However, the motivation behind the deposition of these artefacts is unknown, in contrast to the ritual context which is now widely attributed to deposits of Irish later prehistoric metalwork (Herity and Eogan 1977: 242; Raftery 1984:312,314; 1987:23-4; Mallory nd a; Harbison 1988:134, 138-9,161; cf Manning 1972:246-9; Bradley 1982; 1985:21-40; 1987a:357-60; Fitzpatrick 1984:182-3,186; Wait 1985:15-50 for British parallels). It is possible that items of elaborate Christian metalwork were buried for another reason, perhaps safe-keeping, as the Ardagh chalice, for instance, "... was buried in what had clearly been intended as a temporary hiding place..." (de Paor and de Paor 1958:122). As the chalice was "... not buried until at least Viking times" (Laing 1975: 359), it is possible that it was buried for safekeeping in response to the threat posed by raiding: "... the Vikings made first for the monasteries because they knew that it was there that they would find accumulations of gold and silver" (Henry 1962:61; see also Hughes 1972: 149-51).

The archaeological record, therefore, appears to attest both the decline in, and change in character of, artefactual deposition during



the mid-first millennium AD. This may be indicative of major changes in ritual practice and, presumably, was associated with changes within the society in which that ritual was practised. The most likely interpretation is that this is linked to the conversion to Christianity.

Ireland in the mid-first millennium AD appears to have undergone fundamental social and political changes. These are reflected in the nature of the evidence available, for instance, the advent of textual sources, and in the archaeological record, the disappearance of, or at least decline in, votive artefactual deposits. These changes constitute a meaningful distinction between the Iron Age and the early historic period, although the date of that transition is uncertain. Artefactual deposition, as suggested by the evidence of late Imperial Roman coins, may have continued into the fifth century. The date at which Christianity was introduced to Ireland is uncertain, but Christianity was practised in the south of Ireland by at least the early fifth century (MacNiocaill 1972:22). The earliest textual reference to the existence of Christianity in Ireland is by the chronicler Prosper of Aquitaine, who states that in AD 431, "*Ad Scottos in Christum credentes ordinatus a papa Caelestino Palladius primus episcopus mittitur*" ("Consecrated by Pope Celestine, Palladius is sent as the first bishop to the Irish who believe in Christ") (on which see Bieler 1948). The duration of the conversion process is unknown. Both are further complicated by the probability that Christianity was introduced to some areas, notably the south of Ireland, earlier than others, while some areas - or kingdoms - may have proved more resitant to conversion than others. The use of hagiographical material, especially that concerning



St Patrick, only serves to confuse the matter of chronology because these sources are later, sometimes much later, than the events which they allegedly portray, and usually seek to amplify the successes of the saint concerned in order to advance the aspirations of the ecclesiastical foundation with which he is associated (pp 346-8). Nevertheless, Carney (1954:67) states that, "... it would appear that by the year AD 500, although paganism was not dead, the country was substantially Christian".

Textual sources are not very useful for defining the threshold between the Iron Age and the early historic period. The earliest textual sources only survive in later copies; the contents of which are often difficult to date closely. For example, the earliest surviving indigenous literature comprises the *Confessio* and the *Epistola* of St Patrick (ed and trans Hood 1978:23-60). Although the dates of St Patrick's missionary activity in Ireland have been the subject of perennial debate, it seems to be generally agreed that they fall within the fifth century (Carney 1961; Binchy 1962a; Hanson 1968), thus attesting the existence of literacy and the production of texts before AD 500. However, the earliest extant manuscript copies of these sources belong to the ninth and tenth centuries, and there is a substantial lacuna between St Patrick's writings and the next surviving textual sources, the earliest of which appears to be the elegy *Amra Coluim Chille* of c AD 600.

The annals are not of much assistance in identifying a chronological distinction between the Iron Age and the early historic period either. This is because the entries at the beginning of the chronological sequence are mythological in character (pp 39-40), while those

for years in, say, the sixth century, may have been added retrospectively (pp 40-5). Given this range and complexity of evidence - and, indeed, the nature of the processes involved - it must be emphasized that there is no clear chronological division between the Iron Age and the early historic period, but a date of c AD 500 is probably justifiable from both the archaeological and textual evidence available. That is, the advent of both Christianity and literacy has social and political implications which are visible archaeologically, for example, in terms of the decline in the deposition of metalwork. This date, it should be made explicit, is one which saw the existence of literary skills, albeit of restricted social distribution, within Ireland. It is not considered to be the date from which annalistic entries, or other textual evidence, may be regarded as *contemporary* historical evidence.

It is also difficult to determine an appropriate terminal date for the early historic period. The Anglo-Norman invasion of 1169 is one possibility, but, given that its influence was confined, initially at least, to south-eastern Ireland, this date must be considered to be an arbitrary one. In addition, as with using the date of the first impact of the Norse on Ireland, c AD 800, this risks defining internal processes of social and political organization and change by external criteria and/or stimuli. Nevertheless, this is a common and convenient approach and one which is exemplified by the first two volumes of the Gill History of Ireland, *Ireland Before the Vikings* (MacNiocaill 1972) and *Ireland Before the Normans* (Ó Corráin 1972). However, this is not to underestimate the extent of the social and political implications of Norse settlement (on which see Binchy 1962b; Hughes 1966:197-214; 1972:48-59; Henry 1967:1-32; Ó Corráin 1972:80-110; Richter 1988:105-17;



though see Sawyer 1962:196,143-4,149,198-9 and Lucas 1966; 1967 for alternative views). A date of c AD 1000 may be appropriate, because the eleventh and twelfth centuries see changes in kingship and social organization, with the result that "The type of society that was emerging in Ireland in the eleventh and twelfth centuries was one that was moving rapidly in the direction of feudalism..." (Ó Corráin 1978: 32). This was a period in which "Larger and more cohesive kingdoms emerged, the powers and pretensions of the kings grew apace, the nature of kingship itself changed and by the eleventh and twelfth centuries rule over the entire island of Ireland had become... the prize..." (ibid:35).

The early eleventh century, therefore, may probably be taken as a meaningful terminus for the early historic period. Nevertheless, slightly later - mostly twelfth century - sources are cited on several occasions in the present study. This may be justified on a number of grounds, according to the context in which the source is employed. For example, sources which relate to a physical or geographical reality, such as descriptions of prehistoric monuments in the *dindshenchas*, possibly may be used in earlier contexts if it is known that the monument was in existence during the earlier period. However, it should be noted that the monument concerned may have been perceived in a different manner at another date.

Sources relating to social and political realities, on the other hand, relate to specific historical contexts and cannot, therefore, be applied indiscriminately as evidence within the study of other periods. In some cases, however, such sources may be cited - as they are here - if they constitute a meaningful analogy which contributes to the under-

standing of the subject under study. It may also be valid to cite such sources if it is known or believed that the origins or antecedents of the social or political organization depicted in the source lie in the subject or period under discussion. In each case, however, the date of the source referred to is given and, in cases where its relevance may be challenged, its use is justified, enabling the validity of the evidence employed to be assessed. The underlying philosophy behind this is that although the volume of documentary sources from early historic Ireland is large, the range of evidence relating to specific subjects, areas and periods is often meagre. In such circumstances it seems not only justifiable, but desirable, that all sources of potentially relevant evidence should be cited, as long as the validity of the context in which they are employed is assessed and stated. Indeed, a textual source need not even be historically "reliable" for it to be of analytical value, for it may still constitute a valid analogy or source of inspiration which assists the advancement in understanding of the subject concerned (cf Reece 1988:261).

Textual sources, in the form of annals, law tracts and genealogies, constitute unequivocal evidence for the processes of political centralization and the growth in power of the Church during the early historic period. However, despite Ireland's rich archaeological record, it is not so simple to identify archaeological correlates of these processes. True, a large number of early ecclesiastical sites do exist. The size of some, such as Clonmacnoise, Co Offaly (Leask 1955:61,72; Norman and St Joseph 1969:119, pl 70; Harbison 1970:202-4) and the quality and opulence of some ecclesiastical metalwork (de Paor 1977; Ryan 1989b), such as the Ardagh chalice and the Derrynaflan hoard (p 5),



is a vivid testament to the increasing power and wealth of the Church during this period.

A number of ecclesiastical sites, including some of major importance, are located close to earthwork enclosures which have traditionally been identified as centres of secular power, primarily fortified royal residences. Such proximity may attest a close relationship between structures of political power and ecclesiastical power, as possibly in the case of Armagh and Navan Fort: "Presumably the siting of the ecclesiastical city of Armagh is significant, for it must have been near the secular capital or the ceremonial centre of Ulster (Hughes 1972:178; cf Binchy 1962a:149-50). However, spatial proximity alone is a very tenuous basis on which to identify such a relationship. This relationship - spatial, and possibly political - is analyzed in chapter three (pp 186-93).

Despite the spatial association between some ecclesiastical centres and sites traditionally identified as centres of royal power, there are fundamental problems in the archaeological identification of royal residences. A number of early historic royal sites are known, but their identification has come from textual, rather than archaeological, evidence. For example, a very small number of sources state that a king, or successive kings, lived at a specific place, such as the twelfth century Life of St Colman of Lynn, which states of *Dún na Cairrge* (Carrick, Co Westmeath) that "This Carraig was ever the residence of the kings of Fir Tulach until the time of the daughter of the son of Conchubar, viz, the wife of Conchubhar Ua Maelsechlainn" (trans Byrne 1973:143). More commonly, kings may also be associated with particular sites either through the recording of specific incidents or the use of

phrases such as "king of...". An example of the former is the "Death of Diarmait, son of Cerball, whom Aed Dub slew in Raith Bec" (AI sa 564; trans MacAirt 1951:75), although the date and/or identification of the site in question is unresolved (Warner 1981:49). An instance of the latter type of reference is, "Mael Duin son of Aed, king of Ailech (rex *Ailigh*), died..." (AU sa 866; trans MacAirt and MacNiocaill 1983:323). This ostensibly links a king of *Cenél nEógain* with what is possibly a drystone fort, the Grianan of Aileach, Co Donegal (on which see Lacy 1983:111 and refs); although here again there are potential problems with the apparent date of the site. Warner (1981:48-50) considers further examples of this type of source. References such as these, however, do not reveal the nature of the relationship between king and site and it cannot simply be assumed in every case that the site concerned was a royal residence.

The use of a placename as a king's epithet may also facilitate the identification of a royal dwelling, as in the case of Congalach Cnogba (ob 956), *Síol nÁedo Sláine* king of North Brega. This reveals Congalach's association with the fortified residence which occupied the covering mound of the Neolithic passage tomb of Knowth (*Cnogba*), Co Meath (Byrne 1968; Eogan 1977; forthcoming; p 145, below, on the former; Eogan 1968; 1974; 1984; 1986, on the latter). In such cases, however, one is heavily dependant upon toponymic evidence to enable the place which a textual source associates with a king to be identified, and in many cases the nature and quality of this evidence does not permit an unequivocal identification (Warner 1988a:52). However, in cases where the placename suggests a fortified or defended residence - through the use of elements



such as *lios*, *dún* or *caher* (Flanagan 1981) - it may be possible to identify this tentatively with an archaeological site.

A small number of such sites has been excavated, notably Garranes, Co Cork (possibly *Ráith Ráithleann*, residence of the kings of *Raithliu*) (Ó Ríordáin 1942); Lagore, Co Meath (possibly *Loch Gabor*, residence of the *Síl nÁedo Sláine* kings of south Brega) (Hencken 1951); Knowth (pp 12,145); and Clogher, Co Tyrone (*Clochar*, residence of the kings of *Uí Crimthainn*) (Warner 1973; 1979a; 1982; 1988a:55-8,61-2,65). Excavation of these sites suggests that royal residences of the early historic period may have a number of features in common. They are often fortified with one or more earthen banks and ditches, or a stone wall, or by their location in a site with restricted access, often hilltops, or, in the case of crannogs (Wood-Martin 1886) - such as Lagore - lochs or bogs. Excavation produced evidence for the control and exploitation of natural resources, such as livestock, and of the production, and presumably distribution, of manufactured goods, especially decorative metalwork. These factors appear to indicate the power and wealth, and therefore possibly the status, of their occupants.

The identification of Irish royal sites and their characteristics is discussed in greater detail by Warner (1979b; 1988a). However, Warner (1988a:65) suggests that there may be only two types of artefact which distinguish sites of royal occupation - hostage chains (but cf Scott 1978, where it is suggested that the Lagore slave collars are dog collars), as only kings were entitled to hold hostages, and a "symbol of office", such as the small iron ox-heads from Clogher. The identification of a "symbol of office" is difficult and, as in the case of Clogher, is probably dependent upon textual evidence. However, it may be useful

to remember the maxim that "Not what the king owns or wears but what he does reveals his kingship" (Byrne 1971:144). In the final analysis, the identification of fortified royal residences is reliant upon textual evidence, although this may be supported by excavation.

Despite the identification of a number of royal residences of the early historic period, there is no obvious correlation between these, or other, sites and those processes of political centralization which are attested by the textual sources. There is, as it were, no apparent archaeological evidence for these processes, or of phenomena which may be attributed to these processes. Indeed, even these royal residences overlap with the largest category of archaeological site in Ireland. Known generically as "ringforts", these are comparatively small - usually between about 20 and 60 m in internal diameter - and lightly defended domestic sites, most commonly univallate in form, although bivallate and trivallate examples also exist (Ó Ríordáin 1979:29-59). It is "... a reasonable inference that the ringfort was the defended homestead of someone belonging to the land-owning classes of early historic society... from the wealthy non-noble farmer (*bóaire*) upward" (Warner 1988a:50; see also Proudfoot 1961; 1970; Barrett and Graham 1975). Fortified royal residences are very similar in size - at least in terms of internal area - to many ringforts, one of the more distinguishable differences being that the royal forts tend to be located in more defensive and/or less accessible positions, whereas the distribution of ringforts is concentrated on agricultural land (Warner 1988a:50). However, the relationship between ringforts and the fortified royal residences - if there is one - is unclear.



A more marked contrast exists between the fortified royal residences and another group of archaeological sites. These are a small number of hill-top earthwork enclosures of considerable proportions. For example, Knockaulin, Co Kildare, has an internal area of 12.7 ha, enclosed within a ditch 13.7 m wide and 1.8 m deep, and an outer bank up to 4.6 m high. Although somewhat smaller, Navan Fort, Co Armagh, still has an internal area of 4.8 ha, within a now largely obliterated ditch and a bank 12.2 m wide and 3 m high. The fact that the earthworks are obviously denuded makes their size and scale all the more impressive and suggests that they were originally considerably larger and more impressive. The four primary sites which are commonly believed to comprise this group of enclosures are Navan Fort, Knockaulin, *Ráth na Ríogh* at Tara, Co Meath, and Rathcroghan, Co Roscommon. These sites are variously labelled and interpreted as the "royal centres", "royal sites", or "royal residences" of the ancient provincial kingdoms of Ireland (Evans 1966:23; Raftery 1972:42,53; Herity and Eogan 1977:228, 230; Powell 1980:168; Wailes 1982; Harbison 1988:155-8; Warner 1988a: 55). Of these, Wailes is notable for being the only writer to place "royal centres" in inverted commas. As these terms are in such widespread currency, "royal centres" will be used to denote collectively the sites listed above, without any implications regarding their status and function. The actual royal associations of these sites and their significance will be considered below (pp 70-9, 131-55).

The royal centres are introduced here because initially they may appear to provide an archaeological correlate of those processes of political centralization which are mentioned above (pp 1-2). A correlation is often made between the size and strength of a defended or

fortified site and the status of its occupants. For example, the heavy defences, and particularly the trivallate earthworks, which a small number of ringforts possess may be thought to indicate the high, and possibly even royal, status of the site's occupant (eg Evans 1966:25; Norman and St Joseph 1969:43-4), although this is challenged convincingly by Warner (1988a:59). The even greater size and strength of the enclosures and earthworks of the royal centres may indicate that they were associated with kings of exceptional status, their scale indicating their possession of the power required to raise and direct the large amounts of labour involved in their construction. That these sites may constitute an archaeological correlate of those processes of political centralization mentioned above is seemingly reinforced by their portrayal in a range of literary genres, principally the mythological epic literature, as the fortified royal courts of the five provincial kingships, the *cóiceda*, of early Ireland.

The problem with this interpretation, however, is that at least some of the sources in which the royal centres appear most prominently, the tales of the Ulster Cycle, are believed to be transcriptions of oral tales which were composed during the Iron Age (Jackson 1964; but see pp 155-71, below). These, and other sources, are commonly used to assert of the five-fold political scheme of provincial kingships that "... its origin was prehistoric, and the Pentarchy is the oldest certain fact in the political history of Ireland" (MacNeill 1919:101), and that, "Such was the division of Ireland under the Pentarchy at the beginning of the Christian era..." (ibid:112). If this is the case, the royal centres are not archaeological manifestations of processes of political centralization, but quite the reverse (Byrne 1973:94):



The abandonment of the great hill-forts is symptomatic of a decline in military and economic power. Munster, Leinster and Connacht were all divided into dynastic kingdoms whose origin was traced to a partition among the sons of a legendary ancestor.

The royal centres, therefore, are manifestations, not of political centralization, but of political fragmentation. It is against this background that the small scale and multiplicity of the *tuatha*, of which there may have been about 150 during the early historic period (Byrne 1967a:45; 1973:7), may be more comprehensible.

What is paradoxical about this interpretation, however, is that the political significance of the royal centres appears to continue throughout the early historic period. This is strongly suggested by a range of textual evidence. For instance, "A congress of the synods (*congressio senodorum*) of Uí Neill and the Laigin, in the town of Temair (*op[pl]ido Temro*)..." is recorded in the *Annals of Ulster* sa 779 (ed and trans MacAirt and MacNiocaill 1983:234-5). In the case of Rathcroghan, the annals suggest that it was a significant site by recording it as a place at which ecclesiastical laws were decreed, perhaps before some form of (legislative or judicial?) assembly: "Promulgation of Patrick's law in Cruachain, by Dub dá Leithi and Tiprait son of Tadc" (AU sa 782; trans MacAirt and MacNiocaill 1983:239). That Tipraite mac Tadc (ob 786) was a *Uí Briúin Aí* over-king of Connacht reinforces the royal associations and significance of the site. Similarly, the recurrence of battles at *Ailenn* (AFM sa 722; AU sa 727; AFM sa 766; the latter is quoted on p 71, below) - which may be identified with *Dún Aillinne*, the large hill-top enclosure of Knockaulin, Co Kildare (Wailes 1976:321; 1982:15) - and at *Emain Macha* (AU sa 758; 820; 1103; quoted on pp 132-4)

- which may be identified with Navan Fort (p 132) - are suggestive of the importance of these royal centres during the same period.

However, it is not only the annals which suggest that the royal centres were perceived to be of significance during the early historic period. Other types of literary source also refer to the royal centres and they feature prominently, for instance, within the various cycles of epic literature. Regardless of the date of composition of these sources (on which see pp 155-71), the fact that they were transmitted during the early historic period, before being incorporated within Medieval manuscript compilations, suggests that the royal centres were considered to be of lasting importance by poets, their patrons, and audiences (whatever their composition) alike. While the date of composition of some of the epic literature in which the royal centres are portrayed is controversial, the royal centres also feature in textual sources which may be assigned to the early historic period with greater confidence. Christian poetry, such as *Féilire Óengusso* (The Martyrology of Oengus) (trans Greene and O'Connor 1967:65), which was composed c AD 800 (Stokes 1905:vii), and hagiographical material, such as Muirchu's seventh century *Vita Sancti Patricii* (ed and trans Bieler 1979:62-123) also refer to one of the royal centres (p 124). However, the manner in which they are portrayed in these sources is so profoundly different from that of the epic literature as to suggest that this is a potentially important avenue of enquiry in assessing the significance of the royal centres during the early historic period (pp 77-9).

In addition, the royal centres - *Temaír* (Tara) (Stokes 1894:277-89; Gwynn 1903:2-45), *Cruachain* (Rathcroghan) (Stokes 1894:463-4), *Ailenn* (Knockaulin) (Gwynn 1906:80-5), and *Emain Macha* (Navan Fort) (Stokes



1895a:279-83; Gwynn 1924:308-11) - are prominent in the *dindsenchas* ("lore of places"), with Tara alone meriting five tales. This is the large body of Irish topographical mythology, prose or verse tales which were compiled in the twelfth century from material composed between the late ninth and mid-eleventh centuries (Gwynn 1935:91-114).

But if the royal centres were of significance during this period, then what was the nature of that significance? Byrne (1971:135; emphasis mine) provides a valuable lead in another claim that the royal centres are relics of processes of political fragmentation, rather than centralization:

... the tradition of the extent of their [ie the provincial kingships'] power in prehistoric times is confirmed by the size of the great hill-forts of the Iron Age which remained *emblematic capitals* throughout the historic period. These imply a more highly organised and centralised authority based on military power than was to appear again in Ireland before the Anglo-Norman invasion.

To Byrne, the "great hill forts" - what are referred to here as the royal centres - were "emblematic capitals". However, this brings us no nearer to ascertaining the nature of their significance and the manner in which that significance was manifested.

The basis of the problem encountered in the analysis of the political significance of the royal centres is that different types of evidence are used - archaeological, historical, and mythological. While at Clogher "... the historical evidence, both for background and for *general* chronology, and archaeological evidence coincide admirably..." (Warner 1979b:45), this need not always be the case. As a result of their different characteristics and modes of generation, these disparate strands of evidence cannot simply be woven together to form an outline of the nature of political structures and of political change in first millennium AD Ireland. Rather, these sources must be critically

evaluated before they can be integrated within a wider, interdisciplinary, study. The nature and significance of the royal centres is central to the understanding of the date and form of the provincial kingships of early Ireland, which is, in turn, one of the central themes of early Irish history, yet, by virtue of the seemingly great antiquity of the *coiceda*, is shrouded in obscurity. The nature of the relationship between archaeological and historical evidence, therefore, is central to the consideration of these themes, and will now be considered briefly.

### Archaeology and History

The interpretation of the royal centres as the fortified royal residences of the provincial kingships is dependant upon many assumptions. For example, it is assumed firstly that mythological sources, such as the tales of the Ulster Cycle, represent a reflection of an historical reality - that the royal centres were indeed the residences of kings and were fortified during the Iron Age and/or early historic period. This interpretation is ostensibly reinforced by those historical sources, such as the annalistic entries quoted above, which associate the royal centres with royal, and other seemingly important political, events.

In short, the textual sources are given precedence by both archaeologists and historians in the interpretation of the function and date of the royal centres. This is in spite of the fact that the nature and date of these sites is potentially verifiable by excavation. The logic behind this is presumably that the epic literature presents a neat and readily comprehensible image of the royal centres, as opposed to the limited and ambiguous evidence which the surface appearance of the sites



and excavation may provide. The archaeological evidence is merely accommodated within the interpretation derived from the textual sources. Thus, for example, Navan Fort, Knockaulin and *Ráth na Ríogh* at Tara are considered to be fortified royal residences (Evans 1966:23; Norman and St Joseph 1969:74-8; Herity and Eogan 1978:228,230; Ó Ríordáin 1979:53; Harbison 1988:156), despite the fact that this interpretation appears to be inconsistent with the form of their enclosing earthworks (pp 81-2).

The precedence of the written word is an implicit assumption, however, and has recently been reviewed critically (Driscoll 1988a; Driscoll and Nieke 1988a). The precedence accorded to the text is a product of the institutionalization of disciplinary boundaries in the study of the past. It is also a product of our own cultural perspective, viewing the past from a society which is now dominated by, and completely dependent upon, the communicative powers of the written word. From this perspective, documentary sources are believed to be more readily accessible and comprehensible - more meaningful - than artefacts, because they convey or express ideas, while artefacts are perceived merely to serve utilitarian functions.

The justification for the division of the study of documents and artefacts, upon which the disciplines of archaeology and history rests, is on the grounds that the mental processes involved in their production are different. However, artefacts and documents are both the products of human thought, design and manufacture from raw materials, and therefore both are items of material culture. Seen in this light, the distinction is groundless (Driscoll 1988a:166), as underlined by Driscoll's (1988b; emphasis mine) subtitle, "Pictish symbol stones and other documents". Indeed, to take two Irish examples - the Cross of the Scriptures at

Clonmacnoise, Co Offaly, with its devotional inscription (Henry 1980), and the illuminated gospel book, the Book of Kells (ed Henry 1976) - it may be appreciated that there is no unequivocal distinction between document and artefact and, therefore, in the underlying mental processes involved in their production. This is true not only of those more elaborate artefacts, such as inscribed high crosses and illuminated manuscripts, but also of more mundane items. This is because all artefacts are items of material culture, the product of specific social, cultural and historical contexts. As such, artefacts have an important role to play in the negotiation of social relations. For example, using both archaeological and literary evidence, Níeke and Duncan (1988:13-4,17; Níeke unpub; p 152, below) examine the social context and significance of penannular brooches in early historic Ireland and western Scotland, the production and distribution of which appears to have been closely regulated, probably by kings.

Such control is a manifestation of power, which may be defined as the asymmetrical command of material and human resources, in this case the raw materials required, the labour or means of production, the products themselves and their distribution. Power is the "use of resources, of whatever kind, to secure outcomes" (Giddens 1979:347) and is therefore fundamental to the negotiation of social relations. Material culture also has an important role to play in processes of social reproduction, the perpetuation and transformation of the social system - within which the access to material resources is asymmetrical - through the articulation and reassertion of existing social knowledge (Driscoll 1988a:167). Of particular importance here is ideology, a constructed body of knowledge which seeks to promote or consolidate



asymmetrical social relations by individuals or groups with vested or aspirant interests. (An extensive body of literature on ideology exists, amongst which may be consulted Li Causi 1975; Asad 1979; Leone 1984; Bloch 1985). The strategies employed in social reproduction are termed discourse, which relates to all those media employed in the negotiation of social relations, including documents and artefacts (Driscoll 1988a: 167-8).

The concept of power, therefore, is central to breaking down the arbitrary distinctions between documents and artefacts. This is because power, as a medium of social interaction, is present in all social relationships and is therefore manifested in a wide range of material culture. This constitutes only the briefest introduction to what is a complex range of concepts. Rather than being drawn into an extensive theoretical debate, this chapter is intended to introduce the principal themes of the study before going on to consider the empirical evidence. As monuments and their ideological significance constitute the basis of this study, these will now be considered.

### Monuments and Mythology

The function and status attributed to the royal centres by the mythological sources has been mentioned above and is considered in greater detail in chapters two and three. The portrayal of the royal centres as the fortified royal residences of the provincial kingships of Ireland has been accepted at face value by many archaeologists and historians and formed the basis of the interpretation of these sites (pp 19,99-100,157,383-4). In turn, this interpretation of the royal centres

is central to the study of the political organization of early Ireland, at least at its highest level, that of the provincial over-kingships.

This ignores one fundamental point. This is that, while mythology is not fiction, nor does it reflect directly an objective historical reality. Rather, mythology is an interpretative medium, a means of comprehending the world: "... myth is unsuccessful in giving man more material power over the environment. However, it gives man, very importantly, the illusion that he can understand the universe and that he *does* understand the universe" (Levi-Strauss 1978:17). Thus, mythology may be said to encode a form of knowledge which is likely to be fundamentally different from that of scientifically-dominated modes of thought (Driscoll 1988a:167). Sahlins (1983) terms this form of knowledge "mytho-praxis". Mythology shares with history its status as a creative social process, one which may be subjected to an infinite number of transformations (Glassie 1977:1; Driscoll 1988a:163; cf Hobsbawm 1983:13). Despite having this in common, mythology and history are fundamentally different in character because mythology conveys psychological truths as opposed to historical facts. While ostensibly concerning fictitious, and often fabulous, characters and events, mythology is of potential relevance to the study of past societies because of its embodiment of social and political concerns and aspirations. As Malinowski (1932) characterizes it, mythology may be seen as a primitive social charter, within which social relations and relations between humans and the natural world are negotiated. That is, mythology is a medium through which the world may be comprehended.

The latter role is particularly evident in the *dindshenchas* (ed and trans Stokes 1894; 1895a; Gwynn 1903; 1906; 1913; 1924; 1935). The



nature and significance of the *dindshenchas* appear to be largely unappreciated and Hughes (1972:166-8,283), in her study of the sources of the period, considers them only in passing. For example, to Byrne (1973:78), "... the *dindshenchas* or topographical genre... is the repository of the least reliable type of Irish myth and legend... a... farrago of the etymological ingenuities and misplaced learning of the medieval antiquaries". However, as discussed above, mythology and history are very different in character. It is therefore impossible to assess the historical "reliability" of sources such as the *dindshenchas* because one is dealing with a different form of knowledge from that contained within historical sources. The *dindshenchas* are not concerned solely with the natural environment, but a large proportion of them are devoted specifically to the physical traces of past human activity within the landscape. This is manifested in the form of an interest in monuments, the etymology of their names, the identity of their builders, and the events and people associated with them. In addition to those *dindshenchas* which primarily concern monuments, monuments also feature incidentally in many of the other tales.

A number of types of monument feature in the *dindshenchas* and other mythological sources. One of the most prominent are funerary monuments, such as the great Neolithic passage tombs of the Boyne valley, Co Meath (O Riordain and Daniel 1964; Eogan 1968; 1974; 1984; 1986; O'Kelly, M.J. 1982; O'Kelly and O'Kelly 1983) - *Brug na Bóinde* (Newgrange) (Gwynn 1906:10-25), *Cnogba* (Knowth) (Gwynn 1913:40-7), and *Dubad* (Dowth) (Gwynn 1924:270-3). These funerary monuments are exceptional in terms of their size, their prominence within the mythological literature, and the archaeological attention devoted to them, but, in addition, many lesser

burial mounds also feature in the *dindshenchas*. Although not monuments themselves, the assembly sites of *Tailtiu* (Teltown, Co Meath) and *Carmun* - the scenes of *Óenaige*, or annual assemblies of a kingdom (pp 72-3, 137-48) - are set within concentrations of monuments (Westropp 1919; Ettlinger 1954) and also appear in the *dindshenchas* (ed and trans Gwynn 1913:146-63; Gwynn 1924:2-25). And, as noted above (pp 18-9), the royal centres themselves feature prominently in the *dindshenchas*.

As this study concerns the political significance of monuments, it is necessary to define the term. The word "monument" is employed widely, but often imprecisely, by archaeologists. It is most commonly used synonymously with "site". Alternatively, monuments are contrasted with those archaeological sites of which no surface traces are visible. "Monument", therefore, may be used to denote those archaeological remains which, by a combination of their size and preservation, survive as visible and upstanding remains of past human activity. Most commonly of all, however, monuments are believed to be defined simply by their large scale - manifestations of the "massively material" (Shennan 1983). It seems apparent from this consideration of the sense in which "monument" is applied that it is modern archaeological criteria which are employed in the definition and identification of monuments. That is, monuments are defined and identified according to the nature and extent of those processes of attrition, both natural and anthropogenic, which they have been subjected to since their construction. For anything other than the study of the present state of preservation of archaeological sites, this definition is arbitrary. It does not relate to the manner in which the structure was perceived either by its builders, or by later inhabitants within the landscape.



A more specific, and what is intended to be more meaningful, operational definition is adopted for the purposes of the present study. If one returns to first principles, it may be noted that the word "monument" is derived from the Latin *monumentum*, from *monere*, "to remind". For example, the *Annals of Tigernach* (sa 307 BC; ed Stokes 1895b:394; quoted on p 136, below), refers to "*monimenta Scottorum*" ("records of the Irish"), in a context which indicates that it is historical sources - records of the past - which are being referred to. Above all, therefore, a monument belongs to the past, because it reminds the observer of something or someone which exists, or existed, within the past. The dual significance of monuments may be exemplified by tombstones, which constitute one form of funerary monument. At one level, tombstones may be seen to mark a burial place and commemorate the deceased who lies there. Indeed, inscribed memorial stones of the early historic period are fairly numerous in Ireland (Macalister 1945). At another level, however, tombstones have a potentially wider and longer lasting social significance because of their role in the negotiation of social relations. This may concern, for example, the status of the deceased's kin and patterns of inheritance and is reflected in statements concerning the erection of a monument by a descendant of the deceased, as Driscoll (1988b:228) considers in the case of Pictish symbol stones. A good example of this is the mid-fifth century tombstone from Whithorn, Wigtownshire, Scotland - just across the North Channel from north eastern Ireland: "We praise the Lord. Latinus, aged 35 years, and his daughter aged 4 years. The grandson of Barrovadus set up this memorial" (Macalister 1945:499-501, no 520; Radford 1957:170-5; Thomas 1971:98-9).

The essential element in this definition of a monument is that it is perceived to belong to the past. This is not in the sense that any element of the archaeological record belongs, by definition, to the past, but that *to past societies* certain structures appear to have evoked a quality of belonging to a previous era. This is most readily apparent in the case of the portrayal of monuments in mythological literature, and the attribution of their construction to, and/or association with, mythological characters and primeval peoples (eg p 32).

Monuments are of significance in the negotiation of social relations because they are perceived to belong to and/or evoke the past, but, at the same time, exist in the present. The prominence of monuments within the landscape gives them - and the past - an immediacy and currency which may blur the distinction between past and present. This is linked with a concept of cyclical time, the notion of time which is predominant amongst non-literate societies (pp 34,374). In these terms, therefore, the definition of a monument is by the temporal sphere to which it was perceived to belong and, related to this, the cognitive value and social significance which was invested in it. For this definition of a monument to become operative, therefore, involves the identification of a site which is not of some particular size, but a site which operated in a particular manner within specific past social strategies. Thus, monuments are not quantitatively, but cognitively defined, and are distinguished from archaeological sites by being social and psychological as well as archaeological phenomena. This vested cognitive meaning may alter and/or elapse through time, according to changing social contexts. It is possible, therefore, that, according to



this definition, remains of past human activity may be monumental only at specific times, for example, Neolithic tombs during the late Bronze Age and Iron Age. What is gained from this definition is, hopefully, an insight into both the range of processes which may be attested in the archaeological record of a specific site, and the role played by that site - as the product of specific social, cultural and historical contexts through time - in the negotiation of social relations (cf Bradley 1984).

The temporal element of this definition - that monuments belong to the past - means that the confident identification of monuments from archaeological evidence alone is hampered because of uncertainty about the nature of those human intentions behind the archaeological residues which they have produced. In some cases the social significance of an earlier monument may be inferred from evidence indicating the association of later activity with it. A good example of this are the deposits of Roman coins and jewellery in front of the Neolithic passage tomb of Newgrange (Topp 1955; Carson and O'Kelly 1977; O'Kelly, C. 1982: 42-7; Bradley 1987b:13; Aitchison 1988:275-6).

However, it is literary sources which present the greatest potential for studying the importance of monuments as discourse. This is especially true if those monuments are still accessible to archaeological analysis, by excavation or comparison with similar structures. Such analysis potentially enables the portrayal of a monument in literary sources to be compared with the function and date of the structure as revealed by archaeological evidence. This is of considerable importance in assessing the manner in which a monument was perceived by later societies, the meaning invested within it and,



therefore, its role in the negotiation of social relations. As a result, this study concentrates upon an historical period and employs both archaeological and historical evidence.

### Time and the Past

The introduction of literacy to a non-literate society may effect, or be associated with, a range of social and political changes. This is presumably a result of the fact that both the knowledge and materials of literacy were highly restricted within early historic Britain and Ireland (Wormald 1977). Restricted to those elites which could control the technology of writing within what was a predominantly non-literate society, literacy within early historic societies is both a manifestation of, and a means of extending, power, whether secular or ecclesiastical (cf Harbsmeier 1988). Literacy may be associated with the transformation of social relations and their extension beyond the immediate kin group because of the potential which writing offers for communicating over space and time (Driscoll 1988a:170-1).

The consequences of the introduction of literacy are culturally specific (eg the studies in Goody 1968), but may be associated with certain general properties (Goody and Watt 1963). For instance, the "fossilized" nature of textual recording does not present the same ease with which changing social and political circumstances may be accommodated, in contrast to oral records (Clanchy 1970). Also, literacy may have transformed the manner in which monuments were perceived, thereby propagating a concept of the past which is likely to contrast with that embodied in oral tradition and which is predominant in non-

literate societies. As Hughes (1972:145) states, "Chronology is a concept foreign to oral literature..." and (ibid:146):

... while the jurist, the genealogist, the poet and the storyteller all belong to a native Irish tradition of learning, the chronicler was following a completely foreign form. Pre-Christian Ireland had no chronology. In the earliest stratum of the laws... there is no trace of the week or of week-days; days are reckoned in tens, and were presumably counted on fingers. The whole idea of annals and chronicles was imported from outside, as was the Julian Calendar which made them possible. The language for a long time was Latin, and the conventions of reporting which the chroniclers follow are different from those of indigenous Irish scholarship.

Literacy, through the medium of recording dates and events, facilitates the establishment of a fixed chronology which is likely to incorporate a notion of time which is divorced from that of diurnal experience and seasonal and annual agricultural cycles (Driscoll 1988a: 170). Within the context of a Christianized society, and in particular a society in which the Church was the principal instigator and agent of literacy, that chronology is likely to embody a concept of time which is linear, unidirectional, and irreversible. This is because the Bible portrays a world which has a precise inception and a pre-ordained terminus (cf Driscoll 1988a:171): "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end" (Revelation 1:8). Indeed, this is symbolically attested on metalwork and memorial stones throughout early Christendom in the form of the Greek letters alpha and omega, such as the incised double-outline cross with stylized pendant letters on a stone pillar at Kildreenagh, Loher, Co Kerry (Henry 1965:62, pl 58; Thomas 1971:115). More explicitly, an early sixth century memorial stone from Kirkmadrine, in the Rhinns of Galloway, Scotland - again, just over the water from Co Down - bears the inscription "*Initium et finis...*" (Macalister 1945: 495-6, no 518; Radford and Donaldson 1957:38-9).



The advent of literacy may have precipitated a need to identify "the past" and possibly resulted in a change in the manner in which monuments were perceived. This is suggested by the appearance of monuments and events concerning them within the annals. This necessitates, for example, the accommodation of the royal centres within the linear and absolute chronology of the annals, as in the case of Tara

(AFM am 3502) (trans O'Donovan 1856,1:31):

Tea, daughter of Lughaidh mac Ithe, whom Eremhon married in Spain... was the Tea who requested of Eremhon a choice hill, as her dower, in whatever place she should select it, that she might be interred therein, and that her mound and her gravestone might be thereon raised, and where every prince ever to be born of her race should dwell... The hill she selected was *Druim Caein*, ie *Teamhair*. It is from her it was called, and in it was she interred.

Despite the late date of compilation of the *Annals of the Four Masters* (p 38), this entry nevertheless demonstrates the principle involved, that of the fixing of monuments within a linear chronological scheme.

Given that this entry allegedly belongs to such an early date (ie c 1698 BC), and that the characters mentioned within it are not known to be historically-attested, it may be identified as a later, mythological, entry. Its concern with documenting the origin of Tara's name, a feature found in other mythological sources, especially the *dindshenchas*, is also suggestive of its mythological status. In this may be traced the social function of mythology, the categorization of the social and natural worlds, and the naming or labelling of elements within them as an interpretative medium, a means of comprehending one's environment, social and physical. Mythology is a narrative which seeks to convey psychological truths - rather than historical facts - in a more vivid, illustrative manner than other media.



However, mythological sources are the product of political as well as social and historical contexts, with the result that many of them also embody ideological motives. The entry concerning Tara which is quoted above, for example, is not merely concerned with tracing the origin of Tara's name, but apparently also with demonstrating the antiquity of the site, its royal foundation, and its status as a royal burial place. It is possible that such portrayals are linked with the ideology of the high-kingship of Ireland, through the espousal of Tara's great antiquity and association with royalty. A similar example will be examined in greater detail in the case of Navan Fort (pp 131-55).

Annalistic entries which ostensibly document monuments such as Tara and Navan Fort have an additional, and perhaps more fundamental, significance. This is that they firmly integrate monuments within a linear concept of time. For instance, in the example quoted above (p 32), the foundation of Tara is attributed not just to the past, but to a specific point in the past, *anno mundi* 3502. This corresponds, in absolute chronological terms, with the year 1698 BC. The absolute nature of this chronology is reinforced by the fact that the date of Tara's foundation is expressed in relation to the creation of the world rather than to the birth of Christ. This concern with chronology is a likely consequence of the introduction of literacy. Literacy was, at least initially, a monopoly of the Church, and the Church, with its access to both Continental and Classical scholarship, fostered the study of computation and chronology, which appears to have flourished in centres such as Bangor, Co Down (O'Rahilly 1946:253; Flower 1947:13-22; Hughes 1958: *infra*; 1972:121-3, 142, 197; Byrne 1967b:179; 1973:10, 82; Richter 1988:12). It is probably within such a background of scholarship that

the origins of the Irish annalistic tradition may be sought. Indeed, the earliest Irish annals are thought to have originated as marginal notes in tables which were used to compute Easter dates (Ó Cróinín 1983). That literacy was a preserve of the Church is supported by the fact that, until the early ninth century, the language of the annals is Latin - the language of the Church (Hughes 1977:17).

The fossilized nature of textual recording may promote the concept of a fixed, linear chronology, in contrast, perhaps, to the more fluid, or relative, positioning of events which may occur within a concept of cyclical time. As a result of the incorporation of monuments within a linear and irreversible chronology, it is possible that the manner in which monuments were perceived, and therefore the nature of their significance, changed as a result of the conversion to Christianity and the introduction of literacy during the first millennium AD. Prior to this, and outside a cultural milieu familiar with literacy and the concept of chronology, it is likely that monuments were perceived to exist within a cyclical concept of time. This is the notion of time which is predominant amongst non-industrial societies and one which is of particular significance to agricultural societies, as it is seen to embody the seasonal cycles of agricultural production. Ritual activity, too, is perceived to exist within a cyclical concept of time (cf Bloch 1977a:330), partly because ritual itself is repetitive in nature (Leach 1966:404), but also because many rituals strive to replicate the archetypal actions practised by gods and/or ancestors in primordial time (Eliade 1954a:17-27). This is a universal phenomenon, and one which Eliade (1954a) has characterized as *le mythe de l'éternel retour* ("the myth of the eternal return"). However, ritual represents not only a



repetition of those activities performed *ab illo tempore* - a re-enactment of a primordial event - but a denial of durational time and a return to primordial time itself.

This proposed change in the concepts of time within which monuments may have been perceived to exist - from cyclical to linear - may be inferred from archaeological and textual evidence. The Roman coins, jewellery and metalwork recovered from in front of the passage tomb of Newgrange (pp 4-5) do not belong to one single deposit, but to a number of small deposits (Carson and O'Kelly 1977:41). That these were made over a period of time may be suggested by the chronological span of the coins, which range from the reign of Domitian (AD 81-96) to a coin of Arcadius, dated to AD 383-387 (ibid:35-40). The fact that most of them appear to be in good condition suggests that they did not circulate for long, but may have been deposited within a comparatively short time of their minting, perhaps only a couple of decades, as in the case of the Constantinian coin from the Bronze Age cairn on Freestone Hill, Co Kilkenny (Raftery 1969:47). It is possible that these deposits may attest a succession of acts of deposition over a fairly lengthy period of time.

Deposits of Iron Age metalwork are often interpreted as votive offerings (p 5), especially in cases where they would have been difficult to retrieve. A similar interpretation may be advanced for some hoards of Roman coins, in particular those which are associated with features of possible religious significance, including earlier funerary monuments (Aitchison 1988:275-8; p 378, below). The association of Newgrange with what appear to be pagan gods in Irish mythology is strongly suggestive of the pre-Christian ritual significance of this



monument: "The burial mound... was regarded in Celtic belief as one of the entrances to the otherworld of which the Celts were so conscious, and such great tumuli as those at New Grange on the Boyne are traditionally regarded as the houses of such divine beings as Oengus and his father, the Dagda [the 'Good God']" (Ross 1967:39). Against this background, the deposits from Newgrange may be interpreted as "offerings... to the gods of Newgrange..." (Carson and O'Kelly 1977:49; cf O'Kelly, C. 1982:43-7). These may attest a series of ritual acts and possibly suggest the periodic significance of the monument as a focus of ritual activity during the late Iron Age and its perceived existence within a cyclical concept of time.

In contrast with this is the portrayal of certain monuments in some early Christian literary sources. For instance, the royal centres feature prominently in *Féilire Óengusso* (S23-7), which uses the royal centres, now abandoned and their days of (presumed) royal splendour eclipsed, as symbols which are contrasted with thriving ecclesiastical foundations (on the ideological significance of which see pp 193-9). In this source, the royal centres are not of significance in their own right, only in opposition to sites which are considered to be of contemporary importance, ecclesiastical centres. These monuments are consigned firmly to the past and as such are incorporated within a concept of linear, durational time (*Féilire Óengusso* S26; trans Greene and O'Connor 1967:65, quoted *in extenso* on p 194, below):

Old cities (*sencathraig*) of the pagans to which length of occupation has been refused are deserts without worship...

In terms of what it implies about the perception of monuments in early historic Ireland, *Féilire Óengusso* may be an atypical source, a product of ideological motives and Christian zeal. However, it does

suggest the manner in which the perception of monuments may have been transformed as a result of the conversion to Christianity and the introduction of literacy. Any changes in the manner in which monuments were perceived may have been gradual and limited to certain sections of society - the *literati*, their patrons and immediate associates, both ecclesiastical and secular, for example. It seems likely that, for the majority of society, the past continued to be perceived in ahistorical form and defined in terms of origin legends and genealogies (on which see Ó Corráin 1985). This is where the literary sources are of importance, because, as a monopoly of the Church, textual sources may embody a perception of monuments which differs from that of other elements of society, for example, structures of secular authority. This may be manifested by the more overt incorporation of monuments within a notion of linear time, as *Féilire Óengusso* and some annalistic entries appear to indicate. On the other hand, it is possible that the Church accommodated different types of monument within different concepts of time, according to its own ideological motives. For example, monuments which were associated with paganism, regardless of their continued significance within structures of secular authority, may have been accommodated within a concept of linear time. In this way, the Church could portray these monuments as belonging to a past which made them distant and either diminished their relevance or altered - one might almost say subverted - their symbolic significance, while monuments associated with Christianity were of continued, or periodic, significance. Considerations such as this may be of importance in the study of the nature of the relationship between structures of ritual and secular power, one of the themes which was identified above as being



fundamental to processes of socio-political change in Ireland during the latter half of the first millennium AD (p 2).

A linear concept of time, and the portrayal of monuments within it, is most clearly manifested in the annals. These, however, are only preserved in Medieval copies. The *Annals of the Four Masters*, for example, is a seventeenth century compilation, while the most important manuscript (Trinity College Dublin MS H.I.8) of the *Annals of Ulster*, which contains the most complete and earliest version of Irish annals, is of fifteenth century date (Hughes 1972:99,115). As a consequence of their long history of textual transmission, the annals comprise a complex combination of original - though not necessarily contemporary - entries, together with later interpolations and glosses. This poses considerable problems for assessing the historical context and, as a result, reliability, of annalistic entries. This problem is exacerbated by the lack of modern, critical editions and translations of many annalistic compilations, and the failure of some editions to distinguish adequately between original and interpolated text.

The annals comprise a sequence of entries under a specific year (*sub anno*), although it is apparent that the exemplar from which most of the extant annalistic compilations are derived did not have *anno domini* dating. Rather, before about the late sixth century, the beginning of a new year was denoted by the marginal indicator "Kl." (Hughes 1972:104, 108,143). This is an abbreviation of the Latin *Kalendae*, denoting the beginning of each month; but was used - with a Roman numeral - in the annals to denote the day on which the first of January fell. The numeral was sometimes omitted from later copies, which, after several successive occurrences, caused confusion when the annals were integrated within an



absolute chronology at a later date (Richter 1988:83). Entries in the *Annals of Ulster*, for example, are antedated by one year throughout the period between AD 431 and 1014 (MacCarthy 1901:xcvi). It is for this reason that all annalistic dates referred to in this study are cited in the form *sub anno*, the year under which the entry appears.

Despite the chronological sequence of annual entries, the ordering of entries under any one year may not be chronological, because a comparison of the sequence of events given under the same year in different annals often do not correspond, particularly before c 585 (Hughes 1972:104,109-10,143; Dumville 1985:84). Entries concern primarily the deaths of kings and senior clerics, battles, the establishment of ecclesiastical foundations, the promulgation of ecclesiastical laws, and other events of royal and ecclesiastical significance. In addition, unusual natural events also feature prominently. Even the subjects of many annalistic entries - obits, *mirabilia* (Hughes 1977:17-8), and cosmic and meteorological events, especially remarkable and disastrous ones (Smyth 1972:10-2) - underline the linear and uni-directional notion of time which the annals incorporate. Although Christianity embodies the concept of an afterlife, death belongs within a linear concept of time because of the finite and irreversible nature of corporeal existence (Leach 1961:125; cf Tuan 1978:7,9), which the concept of an afterlife only serves to emphasize: "... the Christian message of the victory over death affirms by implication the finality of death" (Bloch 1985:41; cf Smith 1986:176).

The annals are poorly understood (Dumville 1985:67). In particular, it is unclear what function(s) the annals fulfilled. The "earlier" entries (ie those at the beginning of the sequence) pose specific

problems because of their apparently mythological character. The early entries in the *Annals of Ulster* (ed and trans MacAirt and MacNiocaill 1983) and the *Annals of the Four Masters* (ed and trans O'Donovan 1856), for example, concern characters and peoples who also feature in mythological tales such as *Lebor gabala Erenn* (The Book of Invasions of Ireland) (ed and trans Macalister 1938; 1939; 1940; 1941; 1956), although the entries at the beginning of the *Annals of Ulster* (am 4034-4523) also exhibit a great concern with chronology and computation. The *Annals of Clonmacnoise*, which only survives in an English translation of 1638, abandons all pretence at recording events under specific years in its preface (ed Murphy 1896:11-69), which is, in effect, a series of mythological tales.

The historical veracity of annalistic entries is difficult to determine, and may only be assessed by means of a complex process of attempting to distinguish between original entries and later interpolations, and identifying those earlier, underlying, strands from which the later annals were compiled. This may be done through the comparison of parallel texts of the annalistic compilations (Hughes 1972:99-159). Central to this process is the conclusion that all the major annalistic compilations relating to the period before the ninth century are derived ultimately from a common source (MacNeill 1940:130; Ó Buachalla 1958: 103; Kelleher 1963:126; Hughes 1972:101,103; Smyth 1972:1). This source is termed by Hughes (1972:101) the "Chronicle of Ireland".

Of fundamental importance to the historical value of these sources is the date at which they were recorded. However, controversy surrounds the date from which annalistic entries may be regarded as contemporary historical records, rather than mythological sources. At one extreme,



Ó Buachalla (1958:105,109) accepts entries which appear as early as the fifth century as representing contemporary historical records. In doing so, he apparently follows a distinguished tradition, because both MacNeill (1914:62-72; 1964:71) and O'Rahilly (1946:251-4) imply that, from the fifth century, entries represent reliable historical records, even though O'Rahilly (ibid:253) does not date the compilation of the earliest chronicle until c AD 740. At the other extreme, Kelleher (1963:122) claims that, of the entries belonging to the Chronicle of Ireland which were incorporated within the *Annals of Ulster*, all those dating to before 590, and many of those between 590 and 735, were either composed anew or revised completely no earlier than the period 850-900.

More recent claims have occupied the intervening ground, but are still widely divergent. Smyth (1972) claims that the first contemporary entries appear c AD 550, and, broadly consistent with this, Byrne (1967b:180) states that "... my own reading of the annals inclines me to the view that the entries begin to be contemporary in the second half of the sixth century...". Hughes (1972:116), on the other hand, adopts a more cautious stance, concluding that "... there seems to be some support for the view that contemporary annalistic records were being kept at least as early as 740", although allowing for the incorporation of precisely dated, contemporary entries from a chronicle kept on Iona between 670 and 750 (ibid:127). In a later study, however, Hughes (1977:16) appears to push this date back: "Some monastic houses seem to have kept a contemporary year-by-year record from the second half of the seventh century at least, possibly earlier". This is a lengthy, involved and continuing debate, and one in which the issues have been obscured partly as a result of a pre-occupation with attempting to determine the



chronology of St Patrick (Smyth 1972:2). It is not intended to review this debate here, but merely to note that there are serious and unresolved problems in the use of earlier annalistic entries. In cases where such sources are cited, the existence of these problems will be noted in the text.

Annalistic entries which do not represent contemporary historical records may be identified in a number of ways. For example, some entries may contain information which reveals a knowledge of later events, or they may contain information derived from external - Anglo-Saxon, British or continental - sources, which may suggest that they represent a later borrowing. In addition, it may be possible to distinguish between different hands amongst the entries, potentially enabling entries by later hands to be distinguished from those of the main hand (Smyth 1972:3-4). Another indication is that some interpolated entries are in Old Irish, whereas the body of the text is in Latin (Hughes 1977: 17).

A further source of suspicion concerning the contemporaneity of some annalistic sources is that some events are given duplicated entries, such as those concerning the *Feis Temro* (Feast of Tara). This is considered to have been the inauguration ceremony of the pagan kings of Tara (Binchy 1958a:127-38), and four celebrations of it appear to have been recorded (AClon sa 427, 454; AFM sa 454, 463, 465, 552, 554; AU sa 454, 467, 469, 470, 559; AI sa 456, 469, 560). The duplicated entries are sa 463 and 465, and sa 552 and 554 in the *Annals of the Four Masters*, while the *Annals of Ulster* appears to contain a triplicated entry, sa 467, 469 and 470. These suggest that the writers of the entries and/or compilers of the annals were unclear as to the actual

years in which the ceremony was held. For instance, the *Annals of Ulster* sa 467 records "The Feast of Temair (*Cena Temhra*) [held] by Ailill Molt son of Dath I son of Fiachra son of Eochu Mugmedon. Thus I have found in the Book of Cuana" (trans MacAirt and MacNiocaill 1983:49). However, the same annals, sa 469, has the entry, "Or, the Feast of Temair (*feis Temra*) [held] by Ailill Molt this year, according to others" (trans *ibid*:49) and, sa 470, "The Feast of Temair (*Feis Temra*) held by Ailill Molt, as some say" (trans *ibid*:49). In this case at least, the annalists are clearly drawing upon different and contradictory sources, one at least of which is textual. That this process is not merely confined to the (allegedly) early annalistic entries is indicated by that concerning the battle at *Aenach Macha* (AU sa 1021; quoted on p 141, below). A possible implication of this is that these entries are later interpolations and that their veracity, or at least reliability, is open to question. Alternatively, if these entries draw upon independent sources, then they may be held to corroborate each other and attest the historical nature of the event recorded. The duplicated entry may then be attributed to the existence of a small margin of error between these independent records.

Three broad categories of annalistic entry, therefore, may be distinguished - mythological, contemporary historical, and retrospective. However, these are unlikely to be discreet categories. Retrospective entries, in particular, potentially may blur any distinction which may exist between historical and mythological sources, especially when it is remembered that both history and mythology are creative social processes (pp 24,32,46-8). The problem in using such sources arises from the alternative motives which may underly their insertion within the



annalistic sequence. For example, retrospective entries may reflect a desire on the part of the chronicler to collate and utilize what he considers to be relevant material from other sources: "... later historians had the job of fitting the information into a time sequence" (Hughes 1972:145). Indeed, the preoccupation of Irish historians during the sixth and seventh centuries with the integration of information from often disparate sources appears to have been such a strong one that the preferred word for a historian at that time was *fer comgne*, "a synchronizer" (Flower 1947:5). These are MacNeill's (1921:25-42) "synthetic historians", whose "... essential qualification was [the] capacity to 'synchronize and harmonize all the stories', to give them a chronology and a correlation; in other words, to weave them together into a web of ostensible history" (ibid:37). The law tract *Bretha Nemed* ("Judgements Concerning the *Nemed* [sacred or privileged class]"), for example, states that "He is no poet who dares not synchronise and adjust together all the stories" (trans MacNeill 1919:99). This process of synchronization is likely to have resulted in what are ostensibly contemporary, independent sources actually being the product of a later amalgamation of sources. This may have the effect not only of perpetuating errors, both chronological and factual, but also of introducing new errors. That this was a continuous process, and one which was not confined to the early historic period, is indicated by the fifteenth century manuscript of the *Annals of Ulster* (Hughes 1972:99, cf 128-9):

This shows the text still in [the] course of compilation. The annal entries are well spaced out, with gaps after each year, which have sometimes received additions. Stanzas have been added in the upper and lower margins, and the manuscript is interlineally glossed.



A potentially more misleading type of retrospective entry is that which was deliberately inserted in order to cast a different perspective on a later event. This may have been done, for example, where the legitimacy of an event or office was sought to be established through the demonstration of its antiquity and traditional status. In the case of the annals, one political group is dominant (Hughes 1972:124):

The structure of the annals is undoubtedly provided by the activities of the Uí Néill. A continuous history of the Uí Néill overlords could be written from the annals: it is they who provide the coherent and continuous thread. This is true for the seventh century as well as for the eighth.

In addition, the differing political perspectives of the annals becomes apparent when they are compared (ibid:137):

AI and AU present very different claims in the ninth century. If we had a set of annals for the south as full as the Annals of Ulster we might be as impressed by Munster's claims to overlordship in the ninth century as we are by the expanding power of the Uí Néill. At least we can see that such claims were being made, and that Munster's reading of political events was very different from that of the north.

## Aims and Scope

The possibility of a political motivation may be noted in the case of those annalistic entries concerning the *Feis Temro*. The kingship of Tara features frequently in mythological, hagiographical and legal sources, but is nevertheless an obscure institution because these sources appear to post-date the apparent duration of the kingship, sometimes by a considerable margin, and to be heavily influenced by later political motives (pp 43-4, 123-5). If it is not completely mythological in character - and the volume of references in different literary genres suggests that it may not have been - it is possible that the kingship of Tara was originally a minor, pagan, kingship, whose ritual centre was the Hill of Tara, Co Meath, and which only gained a retrospective

significance through its deliberate association with the *Uí Néill*-inspired concept of a high-kingship of Ireland with Tara as its symbolic focus. In effect, the later significance of the kingship of Tara may lie in its role as the ideological basis of the high-kingship of Ireland.

The high-kingship was a nominal office during the latter half of the first millennium AD and was monopolized by - indeed, was a product of - the ascendant dynasties of the northern and southern *Uí Néill* (Byrne 1969; 1973:87-105, 254-74). The southern *Uí Néill* dynasties occupied *Mide* (modern counties Meath and Westmeath). In their aspirations to create and monopolize a high-kingship of all Ireland, they may have deliberately sought to create an ancestry, and thereby establish a legitimacy, for the "invented" office of the high-kingship by associating it with an obscure, but nevertheless historical, kingship, and by appropriating an earlier focus of royal activities and rituals - the monuments on the Hill of Tara. It is notable, for example, that the celebrants of the *Feis Temro* recorded in the annals are not simply kings of Tara; but also, according to regnal lists such as the seventh century *Baile Chuind*, (nominal) high-kings of Ireland (Byrne 1973:54, 91, 104). It is possible, therefore, that entries in the annals which relate to the kingship of Tara may be retrospective, their intended function being to demonstrate the antiquity of the embryonic high-kingship, and to emphasize its association with Tara, the monuments and the kingship.

It is examples like this - if indeed these annalistic entries are later fabrications - which are termed here "constructions of the past". In a very real sense, of course, all pasts are constructed because they do not exist as an objective reality (cf Driscoll 1988a:163). Rather,



all pasts, whether they are the products of eighth(?) century annalists or late twentieth century archaeologists and historians, are the products of processes which involve their construction through the selection, interpretation and transformation of evidence which relates to, or is perceived to relate to, those pasts: "The past as we know it is partly a product of the present; we continually reshape memory, rewrite history, refashion relics" (Lowenthal 1985:26, see also pp 185-362. One may challenge Lowenthal's use of "partly"). This process is also termed the "invention of tradition" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983): "Yet all historians, whatever else their objectives, are engaged in this process [the invention of tradition] inasmuch as they contribute, consciously or not, to the creation, dismantling and restructuring of images of the past which belong not only to the world of specialist investigation but to the public sphere of man as a political being" (Hobsbawm 1983:13; cf Smith 1986:178).

Most existing studies on this theme concentrate on the construction of the past as an expression of, or vehicle for, nationalism. These studies are not extensive, but cover Britain's constituent nations, empire and monarchy (in Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) and, more generally, Europe and the near east (Smith 1986:174-208). These studies necessarily concentrate on a specific aspect, the role of constructed pasts in the formation of a sense of national identity. This may be done through the creation of a mythology which ostensibly relates the past exploits of the people or nation in question, or of a god, king, or hero who founds or belongs to that people/nation, and by extension, comes to symbolize its fortunes. Such mythology often contains a strong spatial element, with the landscape and features - both natural and man-made - featuring



prominently within it. Thus, the identity of the people or nation is fixed not only genealogically, but also in time and space (Smith 1986: 183):

There are two ways in which the community can be relocated and its 'true state' revealed: through poetic spaces and golden ages. The first involves the uses of the landscape, the second the uses of history. The one roots the community in its distinctive terrain; the other charts its origins and flowering in the age of heroes. Both together provide a history and metaphysic of the individuality of the community, from which an ethic of regeneration issues to lead it forward.

The material remains of past peoples and physical reconstructions or portrayals - statues, for example - which relate to a people's past, are often not only potent expressions of the identity of a community or a nation. Such physical remains of, or referents to, a collective past do not have a passive role, are not merely reflective of the existence of a sense of, for example, national identity. Rather, monuments, statues, and other physical referents to the past may play an active role in the creation and promotion of nationalist sentiment (Hobsbawm 1983:13-4; Lowenthal 1985:44-6,332-7,393-4; Smith 1986:183-9), such as the reconstruction of the Market Square in Warsaw's Old Town as a symbol of Polish national identity and independence after its destruction by Nazi forces in 1944.

This study, however, is not concerned with the role of monuments in the establishment or symbolism of national identity or social cohesion. Rather, it concerns the role of monuments, and those constructions of the past associated with them, in establishing or legitimizing socio-political institutions, rank or status, and relations of authority. This is the ideological significance of monuments, the investment of meaning and value in monuments and their assimilation within a body of constructed knowledge which seeks to legitimize and promote asymmetrical

relations of power within society. The perspective adopted in this study, therefore, is that of monuments as discourse - the role of monuments in those strategies adopted by structures of secular or ecclesiastical authority as a means of consolidating their political positions and furthering their aspirations.

This theme is examined within a specific historical context, that of early historic Ireland, whose chronological span is defined above (pp 3-9) as c AD 500-1000. In particular, this study concerns specific examples of those processes which were claimed above (pp 1-3) to distinguish the early historic period from later prehistory - political centralization, the conversion to Christianity and the growth in power of the Church, and the nature of the relationship between secular and ecclesiastical structures of authority. Both archaeological and textual sources are employed in this study, making it essentially an interdisciplinary one. In doing so, it is intended that it erodes the traditional dichotomy between history and archaeology, that the former concerns kings while the latter is about everyday life. The approach adopted here is intended to bring both types of evidence together in a study of the significance of monuments and the construction of the past in wider social and political processes, some of which involve kings and kingship.

Concentrating upon this theme within an historical context enables textual sources to be employed in the assessment of the ideological significance of monuments. Such significance may be attested, for example, in annalistic entries which record the association of royal activities with monuments and the portrayal of monuments in mythological and topographical sources. These sources are important because "...



assemblies and inaugurations might well leave no trace archaeologically" (Wailles 1982:8). This may apply equally to other types of royal activity associated with monuments, such as battles (pp 17,71-2,132-5). In this context, it is the psychological dimension of monuments - the manner in which they were perceived and invested with meaning and value - rather than their archaeological configuration, which is of prime importance.

Archaeology is indispensable, however, because it may potentially provide evidence with which the historicity, or otherwise, of the textual sources relating to the monument may be evaluated. For example, a source may portray a monument as the fortified court of a certain king during a known period. If the monument can be identified unequivocally with the site mentioned in the source and is reasonably undisturbed, then it may be possible, by excavation, to confirm or refute that the monument concerned was a fortified royal residence during that period. In reality, however, excavation will nearly always produce a more equivocal result. This may be a consequence of a combination of doubts surrounding the identification of a monument and the poor or disturbed state of preservation of many monuments. In addition, financial and logistical restraints and/or excavation policy mean that few sites are ever completely excavated, thus leaving open the possibility of the discovery of further evidence which may permit an alternative interpretation of the nature and chronology of a site's occupation (cf pp 93-4, 132). Excavation can rarely provide definitive evidence, but it is nevertheless an invaluable, and expanding, source of evidence which stands alongside textual sources. For that reason it should be neither disregarded nor treated in isolation from the literary evidence. It is the deployment of both archaeological and literary sources which



enables, by comparing the implications of these two different forms of evidence, the meaning and value invested in earlier monuments to be evaluated. The ideological significance of monuments and their role as discourse concerns the implications of that invested meaning within a political context - the symbolic status accorded to monuments in the legitimation of authority and the promotion of political aspirations.

These considerations define the criteria with which the monuments upon which this study is based are selected. Those monuments should feature prominently in textual sources, ideally in different types of source, for example, annalistic, mythological and topographical. The monuments should also have undergone some archaeological excavation, preferably to modern standards of control and recording. In addition, it is desirable that this evidence - archaeological and textual - should relate not to a disparate assortment of monuments of seemingly different date, function and significance, but to a group of monuments which were, or at least were perceived during the early historic period, to be associated in some manner. This necessarily limits the field of study, but, by concentrating on what appears to be a discrete group of monuments, the results may be potentially more meaningful and productive within an historical context. In essence, this study comprises an exposition of the theme of monuments, the constructed pasts within which they were accommodated, and the ideological significance of both monuments and the past.

One group of monuments readily presents itself as being particularly suitable for such a study. Already introduced above (pp 15-9), these are usually referred to collectively as the "royal centres" of early or ancient Ireland, and are often assumed to comprise the royal

"capitals" of the provincial over-kingships. The form of these monuments, their status as royal centres, and the nature of their ideological significance within the provincial kingdoms, the *cóiceda*, will be considered in greater detail in chapter two. However, as these monuments play a central role within the thesis, and their study encapsulates many of the problems encountered in the ideological significance of earlier monuments, the issues involved, approaches adopted, and aims of the study are outlined here.

The "provincial" royal centres comprise five sites, although one, Cashel, Co Tipperary, appears to be fundamentally different from the others. It does not consist of a concentration of earthwork monuments, and features less prominently, and in a different manner, in mythological sources. Partly as a result of its anomalous status (in relation to the other royal centres), Cashel is of central importance to the understanding of the nature and significance of the royal centres and the *cóiceda* (pp 117-22). The other four centres, Navan Fort, Tara, Knockaulin, and Rathcroghan, are all notable for their concentration of monuments. Amongst them, these consist primarily of earthwork enclosures, with a particularly large one at each site (except at Rathcroghan), smaller enclosures, burial mounds and linear features which may be roadways. All four sites have been the focus of archaeological activity in recent years. Navan Fort (Selkirk 1970; Wailes 1982:8-10; Lynn unpub; 1986; forthcoming a; Mallory nd a) and Knockaulin (Wailes 1976; 1982:15-8) have both been the scene of modern, large-scale excavations. However, these excavations still cover only a relatively small proportion of the total area of each site, and are still not fully published. Rathcroghan has been the subject of two



recent and extensive surveys (Herity 1983a; 1984a; Waddell 1983; 1988) and one of its sites has been excavated (Waddell forthcoming). Tara has not been the scene of excavations since Ó Ríordáin's limited, and still unpublished, excavations during the 1950s. However, some brief accounts of this work do exist (Ó Ríordáin 1955; 1965:9,25-6; de Valera 1965; Raftery 1972:42-3). In addition, Tara has also been the focus of some aerial reconnaissance (Swan 1978). This has resulted in the location of previously unknown sites and helped to clarify the nature of the relationship between some of the archaeological features on the hill-top.

The archaeological evidence, which is discussed below (pp 79-98) suggests strong similarities in the date and function of these sites during the Iron Age. However, that these monuments, in addition, were perceived to have a similar status during the early historic period seems apparent from a consideration of the textual sources. The royal centres feature in three principal literary genres, epic literature, the *dindshenchas*, and the annals. The first two, along with those entries at the beginning of some annals, are mythological in nature and portray the royal centres as the fortified royal courts of the provincial over-kingships. These sources appear to be set in a past, heroic age, which is not only of uncertain date, but also of doubtful reality (pp 155-71). The annalistic sources, however, provide a marked contrast because, although a number of entries do associate the provincial kingships of the early historic period with the royal centres, these entries are relatively few in number and do not prove that the royal centres were royal residences. These different types of source, therefore, suggest



that an anomaly exists in the (perceived?) status of the royal centres during the Iron Age and/or early historic period.

What is particularly striking about the manner in which the royal centres appear to have been perceived is their apparently equivalent status in a scheme which embraces the whole of Ireland. Within this, Ireland is divided into five provincial over-kingdoms, each with its own royal centre. An interdisciplinary analysis of the royal centres and the possible later significance which was invested within them as monuments, therefore, may be of potential value in elucidating what is assumed to be one of the central tenets of early Irish political geography. This is that the provincial over-kingdoms were of immemorial antiquity, with each having as its capital one of the royal centres. Nevertheless, that these over-kingdoms are alleged to have originated during the Iron Age means that, in the absence of textual sources, their formation and development are shrouded in obscurity.

However, the royal centres and the evidence relating to them - archaeological and textual - may constitute one direction from which the study of this subject may be approached, given the significance attached to the royal centres within the scheme of the provincial over-kingdoms. An approach which is central to this study is that it is through the identification and analysis of potential anomalies or inconsistencies which may exist between the archaeological and textual evidence relating to a monument that constructions of the past may be isolated and studied. Using such anomalies as indicators of political processes, such as the ideological significance invested in monuments as part of a strategy in the legitimation of royal authority, serves potentially to open up areas for historical debate and analysis which might otherwise

not be identified and therefore provide new historical perspectives (cf Hobsbawm 1983:12). The potential importance of this may be gauged from the significance which historians traditionally have attached to the provincial over-kingdoms as the "fundamental" political entities of early historic Ireland (pp 62-9).

Of all the royal centres, however, one appears to be particularly suitable for analyzing the ideological role of monuments within the other themes of this study - the nature of the relationship between secular and ecclesiastical authority; and the growth in power of the Church. This royal centre is Navan Fort, which lies close to the major early ecclesiastical centre of Armagh. The evidence, archaeological, literary and topographical, which relates to the environs of Navan Fort and Armagh city is used in chapter three to explore the contrasting ways in which Navan Fort appears to have been perceived and invested with ideological meaning and value within secular and ecclesiastical contexts (pp 128-203).

Armagh emerged during the early historic period as the head of an ecclesiastical primacy comprising all Ireland (Hughes 1966:111-20; de Paor 1971; Richter 1988:100). This was achieved at least partly through the creation of traditions concerning the alleged foundation of the Church of Armagh by St Patrick, and of St Patrick's role in the conversion process and his founding of churches elsewhere in Ireland (Binchy 1962a; Sharpe 1982; 1984). The case that these constructions of the past, and the aspirations of ecclesiastical power which inspired them, were manifested in the ecclesiastical topography and spatial organization of early historic Armagh - which is analyzed in chapter four - is considered in chapter five.



Armagh and Navan Fort make a suitable case study not only because of the important political and ecclesiastical processes with which they were associated, but also as a result of the range of evidence available. Both Navan Fort and Armagh feature in various genres of textual source. For instance, Navan Fort is portrayed prominently in mythological literature, especially the epic tales of the Ulster Cycle, as *Emain Macha*, the fortified court of the kings of Ulster (p 155). Navan Fort is also the subject of a tale in the metrical *dindshenchas* and of entries, both mythological and historical in character, in the annals. Armagh also features prominently in annalistic entries, with the later ones (ie of the eleventh and twelfth centuries) in particular combining to form a pool of information concerning the topography of the ecclesiastical settlement (pp 249-88). Some features within Armagh also appear in various hagiographical sources relating to St Patrick. Although the subjects of hagiographies may have been real people, the composition of such sources is usually later, often centuries later, than the lives which they purport to portray. Indeed, in this context, hagiography may be recognised as a form of mythology. Like mythology, hagiography is a creative social process which may undergo many transformations, according to the ecclesiastical and political context in which it is written, read, and transmitted. As a result of its mutating form, hagiography, like mythology, is potentially a potent medium for the dissemination of ideology and the advancement of political aspirations. This dimension of hagiographical sources will be assessed in chapter five with reference to Patrician hagiography and Armagh's claims of ecclesiastical primacy (pp 345-8). In addition to the types of literary source mentioned above, a small number of sources, but



particularly Christian poetry, such as *Féilire Óengusso*, reflect on the nature of the relationship between Armagh and Navan Fort. These sources constitute valuable evidence for the manner in which Navan Fort was perceived by the ecclesiastical foundation and incorporated within their own ideological strategy (pp 193-9).

However, what makes Armagh and Navan Fort particularly interesting sites for the study of the ideological significance of monuments and the construction of the past is the existence, in addition to the textual sources, of archaeological evidence. Firstly, there is upstanding archaeological evidence, as Navan Fort survives as a prominent monument. The excavations at Navan Fort have been mentioned in passing above and will be considered in greater detail below (pp 85-8). In the case of Armagh, excavations within the area of the ecclesiastical settlement were conducted in 1968 (Brown and Harper 1985). Although those excavations were of limited extent and are of ambiguous interpretation, they are nevertheless important because of the evidence they provide on the nature of earlier activity on Cathedral Hill, and of the nature of the activities practised within the ecclesiastical settlement (pp 221-49). More recent rescue excavations within Armagh, especially in areas on the east of the city, where St Patrick's first church is traditionally believed to have been located (Reeves 1860:5-11), are continuing to contribute to knowledge of early ecclesiastical activity in Armagh (Lynn 1977a; 1977b; forthcoming b; McDowell 1986; 1987; Lynn and McDowell 1988a).

However, archaeological analysis has not been confined to Armagh and Navan Fort in isolation. The 1985 planning enquiry into proposals to extend the area of the limestone quarry adjacent to Navan Fort (Selkirk

1985; Mallory and a; 1987a; McNeill et al 1986) has stimulated an increased interest in the environs of the monument. This has resulted in a range of survey (Warner 1986); fieldwork (Lynn and McDowell 1987), excavation (Mallory 1988; Mallory and Warner 1988), palaeobotanical (Weir 1987a; 1987b; Weir and Conway 1988), dendrochronological (Baillie 1986; 1988), and faunal (McCormick 1988) analyses, aerial reconnaissance (Hartwell 1987) and the reappraisal of textual and topographic sources (Mallory 1987b; Lambkin 1987; Toner 1988; Warner 1988b; Lynn and McDowell 1988b). Furthermore, plans to establish a "heritage centre" or "archaeological park" focussed on Navan Fort are currently under consideration (Mallory 1987c; NFIG 1988). This concentration of apparently associated archaeological sites within the vicinity of Navan Fort has resulted in its being referred to as the Navan "complex" (eg Warner 1986). However, this concept is of dubious value because it is unclear whether it is being used in the sense of referring to a group of sites or monuments which are linked by their contemporaneity and/or by their function, by their mere proximity, or by the later cognitive association of a group of monuments and features within the landscape (pp 388-9).

Despite this, the recent resurgence of interest in the archaeology and early history of Armagh, Navan Fort and their environs, constitutes a stimulating context within which the themes of the ideological meaning and value invested in earlier monuments by later societies, and the constructed pasts which are integral to the significance of those monuments, may be studied in greater detail. In this manner, the study of Armagh and Navan Fort as monuments of ideological significance assists in the understanding, not only of the ideological significance

invested in them, or of the royal centres generally, but also of those fundamental processes, political, social and religious, which serve to distinguish and characterize early historic Ireland.



## **PART ONE**

### **MONUMENTS AND POLITICAL POWER**

CHAPTER TWO  
ROYAL CENTRES AND *CÓICEDA*: IMAGES  
OF IMMEMORIAL KINGSHIP

It was claimed in the previous chapter that, in early historic Ireland, monuments may be defined in terms of their potential socio-political significance. This significance, it was argued, is derived from the investment within monuments of meaning and value of an ideological nature (pp 28-9, 48-51). Through the construction of ideologically-inspired pasts which are associated with monuments, political achievements potentially may be legitimized and aspirations promoted. This theme will now be considered in greater detail and in relation to a specific group of monuments.

The "royal centres" were introduced above (pp 15-20, 51-4). These are a group of sites, or rather concentrations of sites, with a large earthwork enclosure constituting the major feature in each case. The sites are Navan Fort, Co Armagh (IGR H 847452); Tara, Co Meath (IGR N 920595); Knockaulin, Co Kildare (IGR N 820078), and Rathcroghan, Co Roscommon (IGR M 800837). These sites are sometimes also referred to by their Old Irish names, *Emain Macha*, *Temair*, *Dún Aillinne* and *Cruachain* respectively (but see p 384). A fifth site, Cashel, Co Tipperary (IGR S

073407), appears to be fundamentally different from the other royal centres and is considered below (pp 117-22). In addition, a site which is sometimes also classed as a royal centre, Uisneach, Co Westmeath (IGR N 291489), is also discussed (pp 109-112). The surface appearance and dimensions of two of these sites, Knockaulin and Navan Fort, are discussed briefly above (p 15), while the archaeological evidence is assessed below (pp 79-98). The apparent similarity, in terms of their form, date, and presumed function (pp 80-91), as well as their royal associations - as portrayed in a variety of literary genres (pp 70-9) - suggests that they constitute a discrete group of monuments (pp 51-4). However, the royal centres are not merely a convenient unit within which the ideological significance of monuments and the construction of the past may be studied. In addition, the study of the ideological role of the royal centres is important because these monuments are associated with a level of socio-political organization which is central to the understanding of the early historic period.

The *rí cóicid* (literally, "king of a fifth") is traditionally considered to represent the highest rank of legally-attested kingship in early historic Ireland (Binchy 1954:54; Byrne 1971:135; 1973:42; but see pp 116-7, below). However, the supposed political units to which this level of kingship relates, the *coiceda* ("fifths"), were not a feature of the political geography of early historic Ireland (MacNeill 1919:101): ... it is certain that throughout the whole period of our written literature, the political division of Ireland represented by this [modern Irish] word *cúigeadh*, "a fifth", and "the Five Fifths of Ireland", had no existence. Already in St Patrick's time the Five Fifths were only a memory of the past. Then and for centuries afterwards, instead of five, there were seven co-ordinate chief kingdoms and a monarchy over them.



The "seven co-ordinate chief kingdoms" were *Aileach*, the over-kingship of the northern *Uí Néill*; *Airgialla*, which came under northern *Uí Néill* hegemony during this period; and the over-kingships of *Ulaid* (Ulster); the southern *Uí Néill*; *Laigin* (Leinster); *Mumu* (Munster); and *Connacht* (Connaught) (fig 1). It should be noted, however, that this division of early historic Ireland into seven principal over-kingships is a simplification in the sense that within some over-kingships some kingdoms possessed varying degrees of autonomy (p 118). That the dynasties of the *Uí Néill* and *Airgialla* appear to have emerged at about, or just before, the commencement of the early historic period (MacNiocaill 1972:9-15; Byrne 1973:70-86) may suggest that Ireland was divided between fewer over-kingships at an earlier date, although their extraction from the scheme leaves only four, not five, over-kingships.

Not only the origins, but also the existence of the five-fold division of Ireland antedate the advent of contemporary historical records (as defined above, pp 40-5). As a result, those literary sources which refer to the *cóiceda* and their kings would appear to be mythological and/or retrospective in nature. A possible exception may exist if one accepts the historical reliability of sources which are claimed to have originated as orally-composed and transmitted tales and were committed to writing at a later date. Such an argument, however, is fraught with problems, as will be seen below (pp 155-71). Nevertheless, some historians (eg MacNeill 1919:99-105) do use apparently mythological sources, such as the epic tales of the Ulster Cycle, as evidence for the existence and form of a five-fold division of Ireland. MacNeill (1919: 100) labels these sources an "historical tradition", and states that, "... Ireland, in the time of *Cú Chulainn*, was divided into five co-

ordinate chief kingdoms, whose kings were equal in rank and were not subordinate to a central monarchy".

However, the historical context and veracity of this "historical tradition" rest on the presumed correlation of items of material culture dating to the Iron Age and the material culture depicted in the epic literature. This approach, which is propounded by Ridgeway (1906), is used to date the composition of the tales of the Ulster Cycle (MacNeill 1919:100):

A number of modern investigators assure us that the antiquarian tradition of the Ulster sagas is marvellously true to the facts established by archaeological research in regard of the age to which those sagas relate, the beginning of the Christian era.

MacNeill (1919:101) uses this evidence to assert that "its [the five-fold division's] origin was prehistoric, and the Pentarchy is the oldest certain fact in the political history of Ireland", and that, "Such was the division of Ireland under the Pentarchy at the beginning of the Christian era..." (ibid:112). O'Rahilly (1946:171-83) is similarly reliant upon these mythological sources for dating the *cóiceda*. The notion that this five-fold division was obsolete by the early historic period and that it refers to the political geography of an earlier era is a strong one within the study of early Irish history.

However, it is not only the chronology of the *cóiceda* which is obscure (Byrne 1973:46):

It is one of the paradoxes of Irish history that although the division of the country into five Fifths was regarded as dating from immemorial antiquity, and although *cóiced* remained the universally accepted name for a province, at no time was it quite clear how many Fifths in fact existed. This confusion was due to the destruction at the dawn of history of the Fifth of Ulster (*cóiced nUlad*) with its ceremonial capital at Emain Macha near Armagh, the ancient glories of which were the favourite theme of saga literature down to the twelfth century.



The identification of the *cóiceda* has long presented a dilemma, as a result of reliance upon mythological sources and the apparent multiplicity of schemes which these sources portray. Indeed, there are three alternative schemes for the five-fold division of early Ireland. These appear to seek to resolve the anomaly that the word *cóiceda*, "fifths", indicates that this division was a five-fold one, while only four divisions are readily identifiable. According to one scheme, the *cóiceda* comprise *Connacht*, *Ulaíd*, *Laigin*, and the two Munsters (fig 2). However, ambiguity surrounds the identification of the two Munsters, with Keating, the seventeenth century Irish historian, giving two alternative schemes (1629:bk 1.52-3; ed and trans Comyn 1902:104-29). MacNeill (1919:111-2) dismisses the theory of the two Munsters as having no support in the literary sources, being geographically improbable, and an interpolation of an eleventh and twelfth century political reality. This is a north-south division between the *Ua Briáin* kingdom of *Tuadmumu* (Thomond) and the Mac *Cárthaig* (Mac Carthy) kingdom of *Desmumu* (Desmond) (Byrne 1973:165). However, it may be noted that a west - east division, between *Iarmumu* and *Aurmumu*, may reflect a political reality during the early historic period: "In earlier times [ie, pre-twelfth century] however it was *Iarmumu*, ruled by the king of Eoganacht Locha Lein at Killarney, which tended to form a separate entity, although the king of Cashel in the east was theoretically king of all Munster" (Byrne 1973: 165).

In place of the two Munsters, MacNeill (1919:107-8) introduces a two-fold division of *Laigin*, thus completing the five-fold structure. This division is between *Laighean Tuadh-Gabhair* ("Laigin north of Gabhair") and *Laigin Deas-Gabhair* ("Laigin south of Gabhair"). Although



Byrne (1973:130-1) gives MacNeill's hypothesis some credence, the evidence for this division appears to be weak, and is rejected by O'Rahilly (1946:182): "... MacNeill's examination of the question [of the identification of the *cóiceda*] is exceedingly superficial... his conclusions rest on misconceptions". One of those misconceptions is that MacNeill cites the evidence of the Ulster Cycle - which is mythological in character (Aitchison 1987:88-90; pp 155-8,168, below) - for this division, but that the two Leinsters apparently are mentioned in only one tale.

The main objection to both these interpretations is that they do not identify five equal and discrete fifths. Rather, the theories of the two Munsters and of the two Leinsters necessitate the existence of units within the scheme which are not independent, but, on the evidence of their names, appear to have been perceived as belonging to larger subdivisions of Ireland - *Mumu* or *Laigin*. It seems more satisfactory that both *Mumu* and *Laigin* should constitute single *cóiceda* within the five-fold scheme. This, therefore, leaves the identification of the fifth *cóiced*.

Another tradition maintains that *Mide* (Meath) is the other fifth (O'Rahilly 1946:174-5; cf O'Rahilly 1950:388-9; Byrne 1973:47):

The Goidelic kingdom of the Midlands was at first a *cóiced*, as being one of the five territorial divisions of the country, and consequently its ruler was a *cóicedach* or provincial king. In the course of time, however, the king of Tara, as the king of the Midland kingdom was called, became by far the most powerful of Irish kings; and so in early historical times we find him claiming to be king of all Ireland and superior to the other *cóicedaig*. Accordingly the time came when the Midland kingdom, as the seat of the king of Ireland, was no longer reckoned a mere *cóiced*... and while people continued to speak as before of the 'fifths' (*cóiceda*) of Ireland, it was possible to give names to only four of them.

O'Rahilly's hypothesis is an attractive one. It not only identifies the fifth, "missing" *cóiced*, but also explains why it "disappeared", thereby necessitating the construction of an additional fifth by subdividing either *Laigin* or *Mumu*.

O'Rahilly is less convincing in his identification of the origins and extent of this fifth *cóiced*. Having criticised MacNeill's use of mythological tales as historical sources, O'Rahilly (1946:154-70,172) proceeds to attribute the origins of *Mide* to the mythological Tuathal Techtmar, who is reputed to have created an over-kingdom for himself in the midlands of Ireland. The principal sources for this, however, are a late ninth century poem, in which it is stated that 750 years separate it from the reign of Tuathal (ibid:154), and the mythological *Lebor gabála Érenn* ("The Book of Invasions of Ireland") (ed and trans Macalister 1938; 1939; 1940; 1941; 1956), which relates the invasions of Ireland by a succession of mythological peoples. O'Rahilly (1946:166) goes on to assert that:

In the later texts [ie *Lebor gabála*] the territory which Tuathal carved out for himself is called *Mide*, and it is said to have got its name from the fact that Tuathal, in forming it, cut off the neck (*méde*) of each province. But if anything is certain, it is that *Mide* was *not* the name of Tuathal's kingdom, for *Mide*, Celt. \**Medion*, 'the middle spot', was originally the name of a small district surrounding the hill of Uisnech in Co Westmeath, reputed to be the centre of Ireland.

O'Rahilly (1946:166-7) states that it is only as a result of later (ie post seventh century) political developments - the emergence of the midland kingdoms of *Mide* and *Brega*, of which *Mide* became the dominant one - that *Mide* emerged as the name which was used to denote the midlands in general. However, this conclusion is based solely on the existence of a later, historically-attested, kingdom of *Mide*, which need not necessarily have any implications for the possible existence of an



earlier *cóiced* of the same name. It may also be noted that it appears to be within this historical kingdom of *Mide* that *Uisnech* acquires a special significance (pp 109-112).

The identification of *Mide*, not only as the fifth *cóiced*, but as the central *cóiced*, appears to be integral to the five-fold scheme which the *cóiceda* constitute. Its name need not only mean, in O'Rahilly's restricted sense, "the middle spot", thereby implying a specific locale, but rather, "the middle place", in a wider sense, or simply, the "middle, centre" (Joynt nd a: col 131). The significance of this name would then depend on the context in which it is employed. Although they are later (ie eleventh or twelfth century) sources, tales such as *Lebor gabála* and *Suidigud tellaig Temra* ("The Settling of the Manor of Tara") (ed and trans Best 1910) appear to perpetuate the concept of four peripheral *cóiceda* with, at their centre, a fifth - *Mide* (Rees and Rees 1961:118-22; fig 3). The significance of *Mide*'s role within the five-fold scheme will be examined below (pp 104-5, 108, 124).

Discussion so far has concentrated on the identity of the *cóiceda* and has sought to emphasize that a number of different interpretations - all of considerable antiquity - concerning the form of the *cóiceda* exist. Amongst these, the identification of a central *cóiced* surrounded by four peripheral *cóiceda* may be the original scheme because of its composition of five seemingly discrete divisions. However, the variety of forms which the five-fold division of Ireland apparently possesses is not simply the result of misremembered traditions or mistranscribed texts concerning the identification of the *cóiceda*, but rather can be ascribed an ideological function (pp 110-3).



The *ríg na cóiced*, or *cóicedaig*, ("kings of the fifths"), are usually portrayed as provincial over-kings: "To the *rí cóicid* all the kings, either directly or through the mesne kings who were their overlords, were subject if not tributary" (Byrne 1973:42). In this context, Byrne would appear to be applying the term *rí cóicid* to the (seven) principal over-kings of the early historic period, although the rank of *rí cóicid* is not actually recorded in the contemporary laws of status (pp 116-7). The problem here is that it is usually assumed that these two ranks of kingship are synonymous, that the prehistoric, mythologically-portrayed *ríg na cóiced* are directly related to - indeed, are merely the precursors of - the provincial over-kingships of *Ulaíd*, *Laigin*, *Mumu* and *Connacht* during the early historic period. Thus, what are two very different types of evidence - mythological and historical - and potentially two distinct forms of kingship - of the (five) *cóiceda* and the (seven) provincial over-kingships - are conflated. In this manner, a veneer of historical reality is laid over the mythological traditions concerning the *ríg na cóiced*. In fact, any attempt at elucidating the form of political organization which the *cóiceda* may represent is beset by the same problems which are encountered in the identification of the *cóiceda*. This is that the *cóiceda* and their kings belong ostensibly to a period which antecedes the existence of contemporary historical records.

A possible way around those problems caused by the apparent absence of contemporary historical records relating to the *cóiceda* is to approach their study through the archaeological record. This chapter, therefore, seeks to consider the royal centres, a group of monuments which are closely associated in a range of literary sources with the

*cóiceda*. It shall attempt to assess the nature of the relationship between the royal centres and the *cóiceda*, and to evaluate the possible ideological significance of both these monuments and the five-fold division of Ireland, and the historical implications of this.

This section concerns the identity of the *cóiceda* and some of the issues and problems surrounding their study. The following section attempts to assess the nature of the relationship between the *cóiceda* and the royal centres. This concentrates on the portrayal of the royal centres in the literature and the evidence for their royal associations. Following that, the archaeological evidence relating to the royal centres shall be reviewed, with the intention of determining, where possible, the date and function of these sites. This will include the existence, or otherwise, of any archaeological correlates of these monuments' apparent royal associations. It then seeks to consider the *cóiceda* and the royal centres as constructs of the past which may be seen to be of ideological significance when viewed within the context of the politics of the early historic period.

#### The Royal Centres, their Literary Portrayal and Royal Associations

The basis of the identification of the royal centres as a group of monuments, and, indeed, the reason for their collective nomenclature, is the royal associations which these monuments are portrayed consistently as having. The royal centres feature in a variety of literary genres of the early historic period. These include annalistic compilations, the *dindshenchas*, Christian poetry, and, to a lesser extent, hagiographical sources. The royal centres also appear in some of the epic literature, such as the tales of the Ulster Cycle; which, regardless of their date



of composition (pp 183-4), may be regarded as belonging to the early historic period in the sense that they were at least transmitted and/or committed to writing during this period. Some examples of the types of royal activity which appear to be associated with the royal centres may be given from these textual sources.

Some annalistic entries, for instance, record, or infer, the association of kings with the royal centres. The *Annals of Ulster*, sa 779 (trans MacAirt and MacNiocaill 1983:235) records "A congress of the synods of Uí Neill and Laigin" at Tara, at which it seems likely that their over-kings would have been present. The annals also indicate the occurrence of the promulgation of ecclesiastical laws, with the apparent involvement of royalty, at least at some royal centres, as in the case of Rathcroghan: "Promulgation of Patrick's law in Cruachain, by Dub da Leithi [Archbishop of Armagh] and Tipraite son of Tadc [Uí Briúin Aí over-king of Connacht]" (AU sa 782; trans MacAirt and MacNiocaill 1983: 239).

The *Annals of the Four Masters*, sa 766, attests a more common form of royal association, the capture of Knockaulin by the southern Uí Néill (trans O'Donovan 1856, 1:371):

There arose a dissension between Ceallach, son of Donnchadh, king of Leinster, and the monarch Donnchadh, son of Domhnall. Donnchadh made a full muster of the Uí Neill [and marched] into Leinster... Donnchadh, with his forces, remained at Aillín, his people continued to fire, burn, plunder, and devastate the province (*coigid*) for the space of a week...

However, it should be noted that the usually more reliable *Annals of Ulster* lacks a corresponding entry, although an apparently similar taking - this time of Tara - by a hostile provincial over-king is recorded in the *Annals of Ulster*, sa 839 (trans MacAirt and MacNiocaill 1983:299): "Feidlimid, king of Mumu, invaded Mide and Brega, and halted



at Temair...". The corresponding entry in the *Annals of the Four Masters*, sa 839, records how "Feidhlimidh, king of Munster, plundered Meath and Breagh; and he rested at Tara, after having in one day taken the hostages of Connacht..." (trans O'Donovan 1856,1:461). In addition, the annals record several examples of the occurrence of battles at, or near, the royal centres and warfare during this period, as these examples indicate, was essentially a royal activity. The significance of the association of battles with the royal centres is considered below (p 101).

Some royal centres may also be associated with the annual assemblies, or *óenaige*, of over-kingdoms. MacNeill (1935:101) states that "The chief political power of the free community was exercised in and by the assembly. In it kings were elected and deposed, agreements and disagreements with external states were decided, lawsuits were heard, taxes imposed, laws enacted". This description gives an unrealistic, almost democratic, impression of the nature of these gatherings, which were essentially a manifestation of royal authority (pp 137-41). On the evidence of other *óenaige*, one would expect kings to be present. For example, the *dindshenchas* relating to *Óenach Carman* (ed and trans Gwynn 1903:12-5) states that forty-seven subject kings of the provincial over-king of *Laigin* attended, while an interpolation in one of the laws of status, *Míadslechtá* ("Titles of Dignity"), states that "Of the king of the second grade [ie, *rí ríge*, "king of kings"]... he is entitled to a *cumal* [literally "bondwoman"] from each subordinate king who fails to attend his house of ale-feasting or his (regular) assembly (*óenach*)..." (trans MacNeill 1923:312; cf pp 140-1, below). Byrne (1973:30-1) states that the *óenach*:

... was an important event in the calendar of a rural society, and was at once political assembly, market-fair (which is the sense of the Modern Irish *aonach*), and an occasion for general jollification.

... Games and horse-racing were an essential element of the *óenach*. There is little doubt that these were funerary in origin, and that the 'fair' was held on the site of an ancient tribal cemetery. The most famous of all was the *óenach Tailten* or 'Fair of Teltown' in county Meath... Presidency over the *óenach Tailten* was a jealously guarded prerogative of the king of Tara.

At the *óenach* the king could promulgate certain specific emergency measures and ordinances, for instance in time of plague, defeat or foreign invasion.

However, the evidence for the celebration of *óenaíge* at the royal centres is meagre. At Rathcroghan, an *óenach* is attested by an unprovenanced poem translated by O'Curry (1873,2:343-5), its listing as one of the three *óenaíge* of Ireland in the ninth century "Triads of Ireland" (ed and trans Meyer 1906a:4-5), and a reference in the mythological *Fled Bricrend* ("Bricriu's Feast", §66; ed and trans Henderson 1899:84-5; trans Gantz 1981:242), in which there was "... horse-racing at the fair of Cruachu (*i n-óenach na Cruachna*)...". The *óenach Cruachna* ("the assembly of *Cruachain*") is also mentioned in the middle Irish *Cath Bóinde* ("The Battle of the Boyne") (ed and trans O'Neill 1905:178-9) and is recorded as a placename, *óenach na Cruachna*, in *Lebor na hUidre* ("The Book of the Dun Cow") (Petrie 1838:105) and the *Yellow Book of Lecan* (fol 192a50). An *óenach* at Navan Fort is also recorded in a number of sources (pp 74 and 141-2). However, that these two *óenaíge* are only attested in mythological sources, several of which date to the eleventh and twelfth centuries, may cast doubt on their historicity, and it is notable that these *óenaíge* are not mentioned in the annals, unlike the *óenach Tailten*. On the other hand, the celebration of *óenaíge* at Navan Fort and *Cruachain* may conform to the observed association of monuments and assembly sites (pp 143-5).



Regardless of the association of *Óenaige* with the royal centres, a number of annalistic entries, like those cited above, appear to attest the association of royal activities with, and the presence of kings at, the royal centres. However, neither do they appear to mention what the royal centres actually comprised, nor do they state or imply that kings lived in or near them. This contrasts with the evidence of practically all the other genres of literature.

Epic literature, in particular, portrays the royal centres as the fortified courts or residences of the *ríg na cóiced*. In this literature, *Emain Macha* is portrayed as the royal centre of *Ulaíd*, *Dún Ailinne* is associated with *Laigin*, *Cruachain* with *Connacht*, and *Temair*, which is often referred to as *Temair na Ríge* ("Tara of the kings"), with the kingship of Tara or the (nominal) high-kingship of Ireland. The episodes of the Ulster Cycle, for instance, contain incidental information relating to the form, function and appearance of *Emain Macha*. In *Longes mac Uislenn* ("The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu"), "... Noisiu was standing alone on the rampart of the stronghold of Emuin..." (... *inna rrátha .i. ina Emna...*) (ed Hull 1949:45; trans Gantz 1981:260). While this suggests the fortified character of *Emain Macha*, a passage in *Fled Bricrend* describes a structure, possibly residential in character, within *Emain Macha* (trans Gantz 1981:251):

Once, when the *Ulaíd* were at *Emuin Machae*, tired after the fair and games, *Conchubur* [king of *Ulaíd*] and *Fergus* and the other *Ulaíd* chieftains returned from the playing field to sit in *Conchubur's Cráebrúad*. *Lóegure* and *Conall* and *Cú Chulaind* were not there that evening, but the best of the other warriors of *Ulaíd* were. As night drew on, they saw a huge, ugly churl coming towards them in the house.... He... stood beneath the forked beam at one end of the fire.

The *Cráeb Rúad* (lit "Red Branch") is portrayed as the hall in which the heroes of the *Ulaíd* feasted, although it is specifically stated as being



"Conchubur's *Cráeb Rúad*". This suggests that the structure was a royal hall and may indicate that *Emain Macha* was a royal residence, though admittedly Conchobar need not have lived in it. Furthermore, the form and appearance of the *Cráeb Rúad* are implied in *Fled Bricrend* (trans Gantz 1981:221):

Bricriu Nemthenga... had an ornamented mansion built... in the likeness of the *Cráebrúad* at Emuin Machae, but his house surpassed the *Cráebrúad* as to materials and workmanship, beauty and decoration, pillars and facades, carvings and lintels, radiance and beauty, comeliness and excellence - in short, it surpassed every house of that time. It was constructed on the plan of the Tech Midchúarta [at Tara]: there were nine apartments between the hearth and the wall, and each facade was thirty feet high and made of bronze, and there was gold ornamentation everywhere. A royal apartment for Conchubur was erected at the front of the royal house, high above the other couches, and it was ornamented with carbuncle and other precious things; it shone with the radiance of gold and silver and carbuncle and every colour, so that it was as bright by night as by day. Round this apartment were built twelve apartments, for the twelve warriors of Ulaid. The workmanship of this house was as good as the materials used to build it: a team of oxen was required to draw each pillar, and seven of the strongest men of Ulaid to fix each pillar; and thirty of the chief seers of Eriu came to arrange everything.

Even if the *Cráeb Rúad* was not as elaborate as this, that it constituted the prototype for Bricriu's structure may suggest that it was still a very fine building.

However, descriptions of similar structures exist in other epic tales, such as that of the house of Ailill and Medb, mythological king and queen of *Connacht*, in their fort at *Cruachain*, which is contained in the eighth century *Táin bó Fraích* ("The Cattle Raid of Froech"; trans Byrne and Dillon 1937:3):

This was the arrangement of the house: seven partitions in it, seven beds from the fire to the wall in the house all around. There was a fronting of bronze on each bed, carved red yew all covered with fair varied ornament. Three rods of bronze at the step of each bed. Seven rods of copper from the centre of the floor to the ridge-pole of the house. The house was built of pine. A roof of slates was on it outside. There were sixteen windows in it, and a shutter of copper for each of them...

The tendency for epic literature to contain such detailed, but unsubstantiated, descriptions leads Waddell (1983:21) to suggest that, rather than constituting evidence of the form of royal houses, they may be "a story-teller's embellishment". Indeed, it is possible that this may be a literary convention (cf Wagner 1974) and descriptions of elaborate royal halls which embody cosmological symbolism are known in some mythological sources (Rees and Rees 1961:147-54; pp 106-7, below). The common employment of the literary concept of the "royal hall" appears to belie the suggestion that the description of the *Cráeb Rúad* may represent some sort of "folk memory" of the existence and function of the massive multiple-ring timber structure within Navan Fort (on which see p 87). This is supported by both the apparently ritual rather than residential function of the structure (pp 90-1) and the likelihood that the sources concerned - the tales of the Ulster Cycle - were not composed until centuries after the destruction of the timber structure (pp 155-71).

As well as epic literature, other literary genres attest the association of kings with the royal centres, and at least infer, if not state, that kings lived in them. For instance, one of the *dindshenchas* relating to Tara recounts the different names by which Tara had been known (ed and trans Gwynn 1903:4-5):

The Seat of the Kings (*Forad na rí/g*) was its name;  
The kingly line of the Milesians reigned in it

The royal associations of the site are maintained further by the names which the *dindshenchas* attaches to some of the monuments on the hilltop, especially that of *Ráth na Ríogh*, "Enclosure of the Kings".

This association, between kings and the royal centres, is also maintained in poetry of the early historic period. For instance, a poem



allegedly by the seventh century poet, Senchan Torpeist (MS Rawlinson B 502, f 118 b15; *Lebor Lecan* ff 311c34 and 380a13) concerns three kings and the royal centres of Knockaulin, Rathcroghan and Tara (trans Meyer 1912:8-9):

Three sons of Ruad, noble great kings: Find of the valour of warbands, fierce Ailill, loveable Carbre. Fairest of hills is the shelter in which they sleep: round Alenn, Cruachu, bright-sided Tara.

The range of poetry in which the royal associations of the royal centres are portrayed extends to poetry which is explicitly Christian in character. The best example of this is *Féilire Óengusso Céili Dé* ("The Martyrology of Óengus the Céili Dé") (S23-7; trans Greene and O'Connor 1967:65; quoted *in extenso*, p 194), which was composed c 800 (Stokes 1905:vii). This poem concerns the eclipse of the royal centres and will be considered in greater detail in chapter three (pp 193-9). In the meantime, however, it may be noted that it, too, associates the royal centres with kings, or royalty: "... Tara has died with the loss of its princes...". Another Christian poem, "Hail Brigit", states of Knockaulin that "many a prince is under its girth" (trans Meyer 1912:12-3), apparently suggesting that it is a royal burial ground rather than, or as well as, a residence. This is reminiscent of the poem allegedly by Senchan Torpeist (above), and of the name of one of the enclosures at Rathcroghan, Relignaree - "cemetery of the kings" (p 83).

In assessing the implications of these sources, one must distinguish between those which are historical and those which are mythological in character. Thus, those annalistic entries which attest the association of royal activities with the royal centres come mainly from the *Annals of Ulster* and belong primarily to the eighth and ninth centuries. The *Annals of Ulster* is considered to be one of the more



reliable of the annals because of its early date of compilation and its derivation from an earlier chronicle, while entries of the eighth and ninth centuries (though not retrospective ones) were apparently made contemporaneously. These contemporaneous entries, therefore, may be considered as reliable historical records, though, of course, they are not free from political bias (pp 39-45). As a result, the association of the royal centres with the activities of kings would appear to be established historically.

However, those sources which portray the royal centres as royal residences or forts, including some epic literature, the *dindshenchas* and some Christian poetry, appear to be fundamentally different in character from the annalistic entries cited above. For instance, these sources have no obvious historical context, but appear merely to relate to some undefined and remote past. This is most obvious in *Féilire Óengusso*, which contrasts thriving centres of Christianity with the "Old cities (*sencathraig*) of the pagans..." (trans Greene and O'Connor 1967: 65). In this, as noted in chapter one (p 36), both paganism and the "abandoned" royal centres are consigned dismissively to a remote and seemingly timeless past. In addition, the *dindshenchas* seek to explain features - whether natural or man-made - within the landscape by reference to a past whose historical context (or nature) is undefined. Similarly, a case may be made that epic literature, and the tales of the Ulster Cycle in particular, is also set in the past (pp 157, 166, 169-71, 173-4).

Indeed, the sources which depict or imply the function of the royal centres as the fortified residences of kings may be identified as mythological in character. They are mythological in a variety of ways.

Some, especially the *díndshenchas* and epic literature, ostensibly concern fantastic characters and miraculous events, but are, at the same time, pre-occupied with origins, nomenclature, toponymy and ordering as a means of making comprehensible the social and natural worlds (pp 23-5). This presumably reflects the significance invested in these places, and monuments in particular, during the early historic period.

Careful consideration of the sources in which the royal centres are portrayed as the forts or residences of kings indicates that their evidence cannot be taken at face value because these sources appear to be mythological rather than historical in character. While these sources may be regarded as constituting evidence for the existence of a *tradition* that the royal centres were, at some time, fortified royal residences, this must be distinguished from contemporaneously recorded historical evidence. Indeed, it may be suggested that one of the most common forms of "tradition" is the ideologically-inspired construction of the past (pp 43-9). In the case of the royal centres, however, there exists another source of evidence which may reveal something about the nature of these monuments and with which the literary evidence may be compared. This is the archaeological record.

### The Archaeology of the Royal Centres

This section concerns primarily the function and chronology of the royal centres, as revealed or suggested by the archaeological record. It is not intended to give a detailed account of the sites or their excavation, for which reference should be made to the relevant survey and excavation reports cited in the text. Rather, it seeks to review the archaeological evidence for the function(s) of these sites in the light



of their historically-attested royal associations and their literary portrayal as fortified royal residences. It also aims to assess their chronology, with the intention of establishing their status during the early historic period. Wailes (1982) provides a useful summary of some of this evidence, although the original excavation and survey reports will be referred to here directly.

Navan Fort and Knockaulin constitute the basis of this discussion because both have been the focus of recent excavations, conducted to modern standards and utilizing scientific dating techniques. However, one need not rely upon excavation in order to begin to assess the veracity of the literary portrayals of the royal centres. The evidence of the surface appearance of the sites is also important.

All four sites portrayed in the literature as pagan royal centres have several features in common. Each of them occupy low, rounded hills which nevertheless afford impressive views. In addition, the royal centres appear to comprise concentrations of archaeological remains rather than simply single sites. These sites typically include earthwork enclosures of varying size and type, ring barrows, megalithic tombs, linear earthworks and roadways. For instance, Rathcroghan comprises a particularly heavy concentration of sites (Wilde 1871:247-9; Ferguson 1879; Knox 1914; 1918; Herity 1983a; 1984a; Waddell 1983; 1988; forthcoming; fig 4). Navan Fort (fig 5) has within its environs not only other earthworks (Lynn 1977c; 1988a; Warner 1986; Hartwell 1987; Mallory 1988; fig 6), but also Loughnashade, from which four Iron Age bronze horns were recovered in 1798 (p 4). In addition, the Hill of Tara is occupied by an extensive range of enclosures and what appear to be funerary monuments (Petrie 1838; Murphy and Westropp 1894; Macalister



1919; Ó Ríordáin 1965; Swan 1978; figs 7 and 8). Knockaulin (fig 9) is seemingly different in that the concentration of earthworks does not lie within the immediate vicinity of the hill-top enclosure itself, but on the Curragh (IGR N 780130), some 5 km to the north-west (Hennessy 1866a; Fitzgerald 1902; Ó Ríordáin 1951; Evans 1966:136-7). Within each concentration, however - with the possible exception of Rathcroghan - one earthwork enclosure appears to constitute the pre-eminent structure in terms of size, status, and royal associations.

In the cases of Navan Fort, Knockaulin and Tara, however, while the earthworks of these enclosures are of considerable scale (p 15), they cannot be considered to be defensive or fortified in character. To begin with, the large size of these enclosures means that a very large number of individuals would have been required to defend the enclosing earthworks adequately. Moreover, in each case, the ditch lies *inside* the enclosing earthwork bank. This is in contrast to those thousands of examples of hill-forts of later prehistoric or early historic date which are found throughout north-western Europe, as well as the fifty or so known Irish examples (Raftery 1972; Warner 1981), in which the ditch lies outside the rampart. As Raftery (1972:42) notes, "... an internal ditch... seems inexplicable in military terms, but... does occur associated with the so-called henge monuments of Neolithic - Early Bronze Age date". However, excavations at *Ráth na Ríogh* revealed, "... on the inside of the fosse... a trench which would have held a great wooden palisade" (Ó Ríordáin 1965:9; repeated in Ó Ríordáin 1979:47), a feature which Raftery (1972:42) states "... can only have had defensive significance". Wailes (1982:11, n 29) notes trenchantly, however, that this interpretation "... seems... unjustified since (a) the relation-

ship of the palisade and the inner lip of the ditch at this one excavated point may be quite coincidental, and (b) the palisade may form part of a structure like those at Dún Ailinne... which are probably ceremonial and not defensive". That the earthworks of the royal centres were not defensive or fortified in character now appears to be widely accepted (eg Evans 1966:23; Ó Ríordáin 1979:53; Wailes 1982:19; Harbison 1988:156).

The non-defensive function of these earthworks is suggested not only by their form, but also by their siting and by the apparent absence of other features characteristically found in Iron Age hillforts. For example, Wailes (1976:330) states of Knockaulin that:

The... enclosure... is formed by a substantial bank with an internal ditch. This arrangement does not suggest that the bank and ditch were intended primarily for defence. This is supported by the placing of this enclosure in relation to the relief of the hill as a whole: from the top of the hill only a small portion of the bank can be seen... This would make the direction of defence almost impossible for a commander. Moreover, there is no sign that the single original entrance had any additional defensive works such as guard-houses, inturned banks, or the like, such as is frequently found in hillforts.

The partial absence of intervisibility between earthworks and hill-top also occurs at Navan Fort.

Rathcroghan presents greater difficulties of interpretation than do Navan Fort, Tara and Knockaulin because of the number of extant enclosures. Waddell (1983:28, fig 1) records twenty one within 2 km of Rathcroghan mound, which appears to constitute the focus of the concentration. However, these enclosures are unremarkable in size and form, and appear to consist mostly of ring barrows - funerary monuments of Iron Age date (Raftery 1981) - and "ringforts" (Herity 1983a:123-4), the lightly defended farmsteads of property-owning farmers of free rank (p 14). Rathcroghan mound itself is a platform, approximately circular



in plan, its base some 88 m in diameter and some 4 m high. Although Harbison (1970:209) claims that it is "... possibly a Passage-Grave...", it is usually considered to be of natural origin, though clearly constructed and shaped in part by human agency (Evans 1966:184; Herity 1983a:130; Waddell 1983:27). What appears to be a small ring barrow lies near the centre of its flat top. While its exact nature is unclear, its significance may be attested by its apparent role as a focus of a large concentration of sites of seemingly funerary or ritual nature (Herity 1983a:130).

The largest extant enclosure at Rathcroghan, Relignaree (Norman and St Joseph 1969:66, pl 36), appears to consist of two phases (Waddell 1983:31; 1988:8-10). One comprises a univallate enclosure, circular in plan and with an internal diameter of 100 m. The only ditch is a short, external, section on the north-west, where it appears to be intended to cut off the enclosure from rising ground. Within this enclosure, and concentric with it, are traces of a smaller circular enclosure, with evidence of an external ditch on its eastern circumference. Its interior contains a souterrain, an example of a class of subterranean passageways which are usually considered to have been refuges (Warner 1977; 1980), but may have fulfilled other functions, such as storage (Evans 1966:29-30; Ó Ríordáin 1979:70). Waddell (1983:31) remarks that "The presence of a souterrain here suggests that one or other or both of the enclosures should be considered a settlement of the early Historic period". Herity (1983a:132) claims that the inner enclosure "... can be interpreted as a ringfort of average character and proportions... similar to one in the same townland 170 m to the south". Some small-scale excavation, which is discussed by Wailes (1982:13-4), appears to have been undertaken on the



site during the nineteenth century, but as the results were never reported, it sheds little light on the interpretation of the site.

It is possible, however, that an enclosure, or enclosures, at Rathcroghan have had all surface traces obliterated by later activity. Certainly, the largest detectable enclosure at Rathcroghan is only visible from the air, its earthworks apparently having been ploughed out. It is oval in plan, 200 m in maximum diameter, and is univallate in form, except on the east, where it appears to be bivallate (Waddell 1983:35,38, pl 13; 1988:8). In addition, Waddell (1988:6, fig 2, 7, pl 1, 18, no 50) notes the arc of an enclosure, which is visible on aerial photographs and shows particularly well in one published by Herity (1983a:133, fig 38). This is focussed on Rathcroghan mound and it may be conjectured that this feature originally enclosed the mound completely. However, excavation would be required to demonstrate whether either of these features bore any similarities to those of the other royal centres.

To conclude from the surface appearance of the royal centres, the main enclosures at Navan Fort, Tara and Knockaulin do not appear to be defensive in function. Smaller enclosures exist at both Rathcroghan and Tara, and appear to be ring barrows of Iron Age date and/or ring-forts of the early historic or Medieval periods. At Tara, the names of the *Forradh* ("Royal Seat") and *Teach Cormaic* ("Cormac's House") appear to reflect the mythological and royal associations of the site, *Teach Cormaic* presumably refers to Cormac mac Airt, an alleged king of Tara who appears prominently in several mythological sources (on whom see Byrne 1973:52-3, 65-8). However, Ó Ríordáin (1965:10) states that the former enclosure is "... similar to the normal ring-fort so frequent

throughout the country...", and that the latter is "... presumably also residential..." (but see pp 94-5, below). These enclosures abut each other in a manner which indicates that they are not contemporary, although their dates are unknown.

Having assessed the form of these earthworks for indications of their function, the excavated evidence may now be considered. Excavation was undertaken at Navan Fort under the direction of the late Dudley Waterman between 1963 and 1972 (Selkirk 1970; Lynn 1986; forthcoming a). Excavation concentrated on two areas within the interior of the enclosure, both of which focussed on a surface feature. Site A was visible before excavation as a low annular hollow, 26 m in average internal diameter, which marked the position of a ditch. The interior of this enclosure yielded evidence of two main structural phases, two groups of successive concentric slots for the walls of timber structures, the first phase of which pre-dated the construction of the ditch. According to Lynn (1986:12), "The general date for this phase is given by associated finds of plain course sherds from bucket-shaped pots normally dated to the Late Bronze Age (and now possibly Early Iron Age) and is broadly supported by two radiocarbon dates from charcoal found in the inner and outer slots which confirm a Late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age date". These carbon-14 determinations are said to "... fall in the 3rd century bc" (Lynn unpub:5), but are not cited in full.

The second phase on site A was originally dated to the early historic period on the basis of two east-west aligned inhumations and the terminal of an early historic or Viking-type brooch which was found in the ditch (Selkirk 1970:308; Wailes 1982:9). However, "... if the alignment of the burials, which could be late intrusions (and one almost



certainly is), with the entrance to the phase two structure is fortuitous then all of the remains... could be prehistoric" (Lynn 1986: 13). In addition, the brooch terminal was "... found 1 m (3 ft) above the bottom [of the ditch]. The surface of the ditch, however, may have been only c 75 cm higher up in the 19th century (a sherd of that date was found at this level) so the brooch terminal could have been deposited nearer to the end than the beginning of the period of natural ditch silting" (ibid:13). As a result, the brooch terminal cannot be used with any confidence as a chronological indicator. Warner (1986:5-6) interprets this phase as a ring barrow: "It was either a burial place or a place for ritual (a small temple?) and probably dates to the Iron Age".

Site B revealed traces of Neolithic activity in the form of scatters of pottery and flaked flints, after which the hill-top was ploughed. A circular ditch some 45 m in diameter, and the primary fill of which produced a carbon-14 determination of  $680 \pm 50$  bc (UB-188; Smith et al 1970:287-8), was then constructed. A causeway interrupted the ditch on the east, while a circle of post pits within the area enclosed suggests that it was palisaded. Over the remains of this palisade were later erected a succession of figure-of-eight-shaped timber structures, revealed by a complex pattern of superimposed ring slots. These ring slots appear to represent the remains of eight or nine successive round structures communicating with open air enclosures on the north. Lynn (1986:16) states that twenty four carbon-14 determinations were obtained and that "These dates suggest that the phase 3 settlement lies somewhere between [sic] the 8th century BC and the dendro-chronologically defined end date of about 100 BC".



The next phase comprises a massive timber structure, circular in plan and about 40 m in diameter, which occupied the area of the earlier ditched enclosure. Consisting of concentric circles of upright posts, this structure exhibits a high degree of spatial organization and planning. Although the form of its roof - if there was one - is uncertain (Lynn 1986:17-8), it is usually *assumed* to have been completely roofed (Mallory *nd a*). Dendrochronological dating of the stump of the central post from this structure indicates that the timber was felled c 100 BC (Baillie 1986; 1988; Lynn 1986:17) and presumably the structure was built fairly soon afterwards. It did not survive for long, however, because no deposits had accumulated on its floor (unless, of course, the floor was deliberately kept clear of such deposits) before the structure was filled with limestone blocks and then burnt, leaving a cairn 37.5 m in diameter and 2.8 m high. This was then clad with turves to a further depth of 2.5 m.

Concerning this structure, Lynn (1986:19) states that:  
The phase 4 timber building was apparently not used for occupation .... The presence of a structurally unnecessary and probably free-standing post at [its] centre supports the suggestion that it was used for a ritual or ceremonial purpose in the Early Iron Age.... It is sometimes suggested that the construction of the outer circular earthworks, constituting Navan 'Fort', also belong to this massive ritual phase and that they define a sacred enclosure rather than a defensible fort.

Lynn (1986:13) attaches a similar interpretation to the site A

structures:

Site A could be a ritual enclosure of some kind related to, or in the tradition of other, certainly ceremonial, monuments on the hill (site B mound and underlying structures). The external bank and continuous ditch are reminiscent more of a large barrow than a ring-fort.

Excavation revealed no evidence of any structural activity which post-dated the construction of the site B cairn and sod mound. However, the

discovery of an iron dagger, knife and spearhead in the topsoil of the mound (Lynn 1986:19) are suggestive of a votive deposit and are perhaps indicative of continued ritual activity on the site.

Excavations at Knockaulin were conducted by Bernard Wailes between 1968 and 1972 (Selkirk 1970; Wailes 1976; 1982:15-8) and concentrated on an area within the interior, at the summit of the hill which the enclosure occupies. The evidence yielded by excavation bears several similarities to that from Navan Fort. This began with extensive, but disturbed, evidence of Neolithic, and a little early Bronze Age, activity on the hill-top.

As at Navan, most of the excavated evidence belongs to the Iron Age and comprises the wall slots of successive phases of circular timber buildings. There were three phases, less complex than those at Navan, but bearing some marked similarities, for instance in the figure-of-eight-shaped plan, with fenced entrance avenue, of the phase two structure (Wailes 1976:325-6). Phases four and five comprised a circle of free-standing upright posts with a larger central upright. Although on a much smaller scale, consisting of only one ring of uprights about 24 m in diameter, this structure is somewhat reminiscent - in its circular plan and its composition of timber uprights, including a central post - of the multiple post ring structure at Navan Fort. Wailes (1976:332) also draws parallels between the fate of the Navan timber structure and that of the phases four and five structure at Knockaulin - the burning of which represents the culmination of phase five, with the uprights, still standing, then being surrounded by phase six deposits.

A series of carbon-14 determinations from these structures range between  $420 \pm 85$  bc (SI-983) and  $ad\ 195 \pm 90$  (SI-985) (Stuckenrath and



Mielke 1973:399-400; Wailes 1976:338). Although there may be some internal inconsistency between them, they are consistent with an Iron Age date for the phases of structural activity on the hill-top. The last phase of Iron Age activity attested on the site appears to have included feasting, judging from the evidence of fires and the assemblage of animal bones (ibid:329), after which there is no further evidence of activity until modern times.

One issue which the excavations at both Knockaulin and Navan Fort did not address was that of the relationship, both functional and chronological, between the enclosing earthworks and the structures within their interiors. Warner (1986:8) states that "It is not clear whether the huge bank and ditch that encircle 'Navan Fort'... should be dated to the Late Bronze Age or to the Early Iron Age". Wailes (1976:

332), however, considers a wider chronological range:

... at neither site has the enclosing bank and ditch been shown to be contemporary with the "central" Iron Age structures. Since both sites have produced Neolithic material, a Neolithic date for the bank and ditch is plausible for either site; indeed any late prehistoric or very early historic date remains possible. However, at both sites the bank and ditch are well-preserved and relatively little eroded, and at both sites the major known period of activity is the early Iron Age. These factors tend to favour an Iron Age rather than Neolithic date.

Lynn (1986:19) remains more cautious:

It is sometimes suggested that the construction of the outer circular earthworks, constituting Navan 'Fort', also belong to this massive ritual phase [ie during which the multiple post ring structure and its covering mound were constructed] and that they define a sacred enclosure rather than a defensible fort. Only the recovery, however, of closely-datable material from the bottom of the ditch could provide firm evidence for the date of the earthwork.

However, Simpson (1989) has recently proposed that the earthworks of Navan Fort may be of Neolithic date. This claim is made on the basis of evidence for Neolithic activity at Navan Fort and within its

vicinity, the similarity in form between a group of Irish "hengiform" enclosures - which includes Navan Fort - and British henges of Neolithic date, and the similarities in the distribution of those earthworks and that of Neolithic passage tombs in Ireland. In support of this, Simpson cites the evidence of a carbon-14 date from the ditch of Navan Fort, which provides a *terminus ante quem* of 470±40 bc (UB-3091) for the construction of the ditch (Weir 1989). At two standard deviations this calibrates to 766-398 BC, providing a 95% probability that the date falls within this range. However, the sample which yielded this date was obtained from a core sample taken from the ditch fill and therefore lacks a secure stratigraphic context. More accurate dating of the ditch will have to await excavation.

In some respects, however, the date of the earthworks is irrelevant. If it is established that the enclosure was constructed during the Neolithic period, then this does nothing to diminish the significance of the site during later prehistory, which is attested by the late Bronze Age and Iron Age structures which were excavated within it (pp 85-9). Indeed, if the earthworks prove to belong to the Neolithic, then this emphasizes the significance which was attached to earlier sites within the landscape.

Lynn (1986:13,15,17,19) ascribes a ritual interpretation to the structures on site A and the multiple post ring structure and its covering mound on site B at Navan Fort, while Wailes (1976:329-31) states his preference for a ritual interpretation of both the earthworks and the excavated structures at Knockaulin. In the light of this, it is possible that Navan Fort and Knockaulin represent examples of that phenomenon found throughout the Celtic world, the sanctuary (Ross 1967:



40-6, 59, 365; Piggott 1968:51-73; 1978; Powell 1980:166-75; Brunaux 1988:10-41, 137-9). This may be defined as a sacred space set apart from the profane world, usually by means of some form of boundary (cf pp 289-305). On the basis of analogy with such sites, and on the possibility that the function of the enclosures discussed here is related in some manner to that of the structures within their interiors, an Iron Age date for the earthworks is still feasible. However, a better understanding of the relationship between internal structures and enclosing earthworks, and the date of those earthworks, is dependent upon further excavation.

The results of excavation, therefore, suggest that Knockaulin and Navan Fort were not fortified or residential sites during the Iron Age, but rather were foci of ritual activity and possibly constituted sacred enclosures. However, any conclusions regarding the function and chronology of these sites must note that only a small proportion of the interiors of both sites has been excavated. As Wailes (1976:331) states, "Residential or other use cannot be ruled out for areas of the site not yet investigated". This applies equally to residential use of the early historic period as well as of the Iron Age.

Although one must beware of drawing conclusions *ex silencio*, it may be noted that evidence of early historic occupation might have been expected to occur in the form of structural remains and artefactual assemblages, perhaps akin to the evidence recovered from known early historic royal fortifications such as Clogher, Co Tyrone (Warner 1973; 1982; 1988a:55-8, 61-2, 65). The artefactual evidence is probably the most diagnostic and might be expected to include sherds of imported pottery - fine red bowls (class A) and amphorae (class B) from the Mediterranean

and gritty, buff-coloured vessels (class E) of possibly Gaulish origin (Thomas 1959; 1981). Other evidence which may be characteristic of early historic royal occupation may include not only items of decorative metalwork such as pins and penannular brooches, but also the means of production of such artefacts, as revealed by mould fragments, crucibles, slag and unfinished products (eg Warner 1979a:37; 1988a:66; see also Craddock 1989). Indeed, in addition to the manufacture of penannular brooches, the excavations at Clogher also yielded evidence for iron, bronze, gold and glass working on the site. While such evidence is not confined to sites of known royal occupation - imported pottery and evidence of metalworking also occurs on some ecclesiastical sites (pp 153-4, 264-5) - an extensive range of this sort of artefactual material and the types of activity which it attests may be indicative of a fort's royal occupation. The excavations at Navan Fort and Knockaulin, however, yielded no such evidence. While it may be possible that such evidence exists within unexcavated areas of either or both sites, it may be noted that no indications whatsoever of any early historic activity appear to have been detected during the course of excavation. Although four penannular brooches and two sherds of what is probably imported pottery have been found within the vicinity of Navan Fort (pp 149-50, 153-4), this does not by itself indicate that Navan Fort was occupied during the early historic period.

Warner (1988a:67) makes four generalizations about the type of evidence which may be expected to be found on royal sites of the early historic period. These may be compared with the evidence from Navan Fort and Knockaulin. The first generalization is that "Signs of ritual, such as a mound, would be strong positive evidence of royalty". Although one



may question the assumption that mounds are necessarily associated with ritual activity during the early historic period and that ritual is necessarily associated with royalty, Navan Fort does have a mound, although Knockaulin is associated with no such feature. Warner's second point is that "The site is likely to be internally small but defensible ... and might well be indistinguishable from others in the locality". This clearly applies to neither Navan Fort nor Knockaulin. "Complexity of earthworks, unless some are of a ritual nature, is not necessary, but multivallation might be a good pointer", is next on Warner's list. Although they are believed to have a ritual significance (pp 90-1), the earthworks of both enclosures are not complex, each consisting of a simple, albeit large, bank and internal ditch. Neither site shows any evidence of multivallation. The final generalization is that "... evidence of wealth, a very large house and mixed industrial waste would be good pointers". There are no traces of early historic wealth or industrial waste from either of the royal centres. Although some metal-work and possible imported pottery has been found near Navan Fort, this can be interpreted in another way (pp 149-55). While both have yielded evidence of internal, timber structures, these appear to belong to the Iron Age and cannot realistically be referred to as "houses" because of an absence of evidence of domestic activity and their apparent ritual nature or associations. From Warner's (1988a:67) generalizations about the features which an early historic royal site might be expected to exhibit, one can only conclude that Navan Fort and Knockaulin do not conform to these expectations.

Despite the possibility that evidence of early historic royal occupation may be discovered in the future, it would be unrealistic to

disregard the evidence currently available for the date and function of these sites on the grounds that further evidence may come to light. The interpretation of Navan Fort and Knockaulin may be amended if and when this occurs but it is entirely consistent with the evidence as it stands at present to state that their Iron Age phases appear to have been ritual rather than residential in character and that there is no archaeological evidence for any activity of later than Iron Age date.

It is difficult to know how representative, in terms of their function and chronology, Navan Fort and Knockaulin are in comparison to the other royal centres although they do comprise two out of a total of only four sites. The problem at Rathcroghan caused by the large numbers of enclosures there, has already been mentioned (p 82). While *Ráth na Ríogh* at Tara is undated, it bears such similarities of size, form and location to the main enclosures at Navan Fort and Knockaulin as to suggest that it may be of similar date and function and therefore may be an Iron Age enclosure of apparent religious significance. It is notable that the earthworks of *Ráth na Ríogh* appear to diverge from their course slightly in order to incorporate the Neolithic passage tomb of *Dumha na nGiall* and the site of another possible burial mound (site A in fig 8), suggesting that the enclosure post-dates these structures.

The two smaller enclosures, the *Forradh* and *Teach Cormaic*, which lie within the interior of *Ráth na Ríogh*, have been mentioned above (pp 84-5). It was stated there that their small size and general similarity to ringforts of the early historic and Medieval periods probably indicates that these enclosures may represent the lightly defended residences of free farmers. Admittedly, this interpretation appears to be at odds with Tara's royal associations during the early historic



period, an anomaly which, perhaps, excavation alone may solve. An alternative interpretation is that these enclosures represent ring barrows of Iron Age date rather than ring forts of the early historic period. They are somewhat similar in size and form to other structures on the Hill of Tara which appear to be ring barrows, *Ráth Gráinne* and the *Claoín Fhearta* (Petrie 1838:216-21; Macalister 1919:272-4; Ó Ríordáin 1965:23-4). Indeed, *Teach Cormaic* "... has its centre raised into a flat-topped mound, possibly a burial mound of the early Iron Age. The outer bank of Cormac's house diverges on the N side to include within it a small pre-existing mound which looks sepulchral" (Evans 1966:176; cf Ó Ríordáin 1965:10; Swan 1978:54).

Another enclosure on the Hill of Tara is also of possible relevance in assessing the nature and chronology of any possible occupation at this royal centre. The internal area of *Ráth na Seanaid* ("Rath of the Synods") is slightly smaller than those of the *Forradh* and *Teach Cormaic*, but the enclosure is distinguished by its trivallate earthworks. Excavation by Ó Ríordáin in 1952-53 revealed a complex structural sequence of four phases, each of which was associated with an expansion of the site by the addition of a further line of rock-cut ditches, palisade trenches and banks. Ó Ríordáin (1965:26) states that the latter were "imposing", suggesting that the enclosure may have been fortified, while "The site was inhabited and evidences were available of ordinary domestic and industrial activities - iron smelting and enamelling, for instance. But there are special features which suggest a ritual purpose...". These "special features" apparently include "The mound at the west - a burial mound with skeletal and burnt burials had three building phases, in the third of which it was brought within the outer

bank of the general enclosure. In the centre... were burials - five unburnt bodies placed there some time before the final desertion of the site" (ibid:26).

Warner (1988a:57) goes further and interprets "... this ringfort as the king's residence at times of inauguration or other ritual in the Early Historic period", although this is unsubstantiated. As the excavations remain unpublished it is impossible to assess the basis of Ó Ríordáin's interpretation. These excavations yielded some Roman artefacts, mainly Samian ware (Bateson 1973:71-2), although in the absence of an excavation report the contexts in which these were found is unknown. It would appear, however, that they represent genuine finds, unlike the hoard of Roman coins which was "planted" on the site in 1899 for the attention of the British Israelites during their destructive search for the Ark of the Covenant (Macalister 1919:253; Bateson 1973: 59-60). On the basis of the excavated Roman material from *Ráth na Seanaid*, Ó Ríordáin (1965:26) states that "... the history of this site extends from the first to the third century AD".

The evidence from *Ráth na Seanaid* suggests that the occupation of this site (if that is what it was) is of rather unusual character. Although its occupants appear to have had both access to and control over raw materials, processes, and presumably the manufactured enamelled metalwork as well, this does not by itself indicate their royal status. Some of the problems in identifying sites of royal residence were considered above (pp 11-4), where it was noted that only an explicit literary reference is sufficient to identify a site as a royal residence or fortification. This, however, effectively makes the identification of prehistoric royal sites impossible. A possible solution would be to



attempt to establish a settlement hierarchy instead. This could be done using whatever traits were considered to be significant, such as the scale of the enclosing earthworks, the presence of industrial activity, and so on. While it would not reveal what were categorically *royal* sites, a case could be made that this approach enables the identification of those sites associated with the higher echelons of the social hierarchy.

A similar approach may be applied in the case of Navan Fort. The extraordinary nature of the multiple post ring structure and its covering mound may imply some form of centralized control or authority in the planning of the structure and in the mobilization and direction of the labour force. However, it is impossible to deduce whether the labour required was raised compulsorily by a powerful socio-political hierarchy or whether these structures are the product of a communally-based and voluntarily-offered effort. As a result, the political context of the construction of Navan Fort is unknown. Centres can arise out of *different* social processes and, quite simply, there is no firm evidence to associate the construction of Navan Fort with a kingship. In this context it may be noted that Lynn (1986:17) interprets the multiple post ring structure as being the product of a "... carefully supervised communal effort...".

In conclusion, the archaeological record appears to contrast with the portrayal of the royal centres in the literary sources. Archaeological evidence indicates that the main enclosures at Navan Fort and Knockaulin contained structures which are seemingly exceptional in their form, size and treatment, suggesting that they were of special, and apparently ritual, significance. The enclosures do not seem to have

been fortified or residential. Furthermore, the archaeological evidence of structural and other activity within these enclosures does not appear to extend beyond the Iron Age. This, combined with the fact that these monuments may belong to a larger class of Iron Age enclosures (p 100), suggests that the royal centres cannot be used to demonstrate the Iron Age antiquity of the *coiceda*. As a result of this contrast, a distinction is made throughout this work between the royal centres as literary phenomena and the actual sites themselves. For example, *Emain Macha* exists essentially as a literary creation - a construction of the past - the royal centre as it is portrayed, for example, in the tales of the Ulster Cycle. As this literary portrayal does not seem to correspond with an historical reality, it would be unjustified to apply the name *Emain Macha* to the structure of Navan Fort, which represents the physical product of historical processes and the physical basis of the literary creation (p 384). Thus, while Navan Fort's name is derived from *Emain Macha* (p 132), the two names are not used interchangeably, but, for the purposes of this study, are used specifically to denote the physical and literary manifestations of this royal centre respectively. The other royal centres are treated in a similar manner.

Taken together, these two sources of evidence - archaeological and literary - appear to present an anomaly regarding the date and function of the royal centres. However, it is the apparent inconsistency of these sources which enables the nature of the significance of the royal centres - and through them the *coiceda* - within early historic Ireland to be identified.



## The Royal Centres and the *Cóiceda*

At this point it must be reiterated what evidence the immemorial antiquity of the *cóiceda* actually rests upon. The first is mythological sources, particularly epic literature such as the tales of the Ulster Cycle, which portray a political geography of five bellicose *cóiceda*, including a powerful and extensive *Ulaíd*. However, it may be questioned whether this literature is reflective in character, that is, whether it comprises a contemporary portrayal of an actual socio-political context, or whether it is mythological and/or represents a construction of the past (pp 155-71).

The archaeological record is also thought to attest the major political units of the late Iron Age. Here, however, the archaeological evidence has been deployed within the framework of an allegedly historical context which is derived from the epic literature. As a result, the interpretation of the archaeological record is influenced by the creation of monuments within the epic literature. Byrne (1971:135; emphasis mine) is perhaps the most explicit exponent of the significance which the royal centres as monuments have had for the perception of the nature of the *cóiceda*:

... the tradition of the extent of their [the *cóiceda*'s] power in prehistoric times is confirmed by the size of the great hill-forts of the Iron Age *which remained emblematic capitals throughout the historical period*. These imply a more highly organised and centralised authority based on military power than was to appear again in Ireland before the Anglo-Norman invasion.

And (1973:94):

The abandonment of the great hill-forts is symptomatic of a decline in military and economic power. Munster, Leinster and Connacht were all divided into dynastic kingdoms whose origin was traced to a partition among the sons of a legendary ancestor.

Byrne's "hill-forts" are the royal centres and these cannot be used to demonstrate the Iron Age origins of the *cóiceda*. The archaeological

evidence (pp 79-98), indicates that these sites were not of military significance but appear to have been sacred enclosures and foci of ritual activity during the Iron Age. Their contemporary political context or significance is unclear (p 97). Indeed, there is no evidence to associate the royal centres with the prehistoric over-kingdoms which the *coiceda* allegedly represent, or to identify them as the premier sites; the "capitals", of the *coiceda*.

The only explicit link between these monuments, their *assumed* status as royal "capitals" and the *coiceda*, is in mythological literature. As mentioned above (p 99), and considered in greater detail in the case of Navan Fort (pp 170-1), this evidence is untenable because it does not reflect an historical reality. In fact, the enclosures which comprise the early historic royal centres may not be exceptional. Many other large hill-top enclosures of possibly similar date exist in Ireland. Raftery (1972) terms these "hill-forts", but some, from the form of their earthworks and their siting, are apparently not defensive in form and either enclose or are otherwise associated with monuments, often funerary ones. Examples include the enclosures at Lyles Hill, Co Antrim (Evans 1966:49-52; Raftery 1972:40,42-3; Simpson and Gibson 1989), Freestone Hill, Co Kilkenny (Raftery 1969; 1972:40,43,48,53) and Knockbrack, Co Dublin (Keeling 1983). What does make the royal centres exceptional is their state of preservation and, possibly reflecting this, their portrayal in the mythological literature and their association with royal activities during the early historic period. However, their literary portrayal and royal associations reflect the symbolic significance with which these monuments were invested during



the early historic period and need not necessarily reveal anything about their status during the Iron Age.

That the symbolic significance of the royal centres extended beyond the provincial over-kingdoms in which they were located is suggested by the frequency with which they were siezed by hostile over-kingdoms. Some annalistic entries, such as that relating to the occupation of Knockaulin by *Clann Cholmáin* (AFM sa 766; quoted on p 71, above) even appear to suggest that the capture and occupation of an opposing over-kingdom's royal centre was the objective of this aggression. Just as the loss of a king in battle symbolized the defeat of his kingdom (Binchy 1970:17; MacNiocaill 1972:45-6; Wormald 1986:153), so the loss of their royal centre may have symbolized the defeat of a provincial over-kingdom.

The significance of the royal centres within the five-fold division is that they serve as foci, physical expressions of what is an abstract, cosmological scheme - the *cóiceda*. This association is implicit in much of the epic literature, in which the royal centres are portrayed as the "capitals" of the *cóiceda* and, in some cases, the scene of the fifths' *óenach*. The identification of a *coiced* with a royal centre is explicitly attested, for example, in sources such as *Cath Ruís na Ríge for Bóinn* ("The Battle of *Ross na Ríge* on the Boyne"), in which *Ulaid* is referred to as the *cóiced Emno*, the "fifth of *Emain* [*Macha*]" (ed Hogan 1892:6).

Wailles (1982), in his review of the evidence relating to the royal centres, neglects to consider the significance of the apparent anomalies between the archaeological and literary evidence, and why these sites feature so prominently in the literature - and consciousness - of the early historic period. He dismisses the contradictions between the

archaeological and literary evidence on the grounds that "... their [the royal centres'] identification as royal residences may derive from later misunderstandings as to the original functions of the sites" (Wailes 1982:21). However, the literary sources which portray the royal centres should not be viewed as "misunderstandings", but rather as constructions of the past, historical interpretations based upon the perception of prominent monuments within the landscape of early historic Ireland.

As symbols of the past, the royal centres and the histories constructed around them are open to appropriation and may be employed in the legitimation of royal rank and political power. This may be supported with reference to those historically-attested royal activities which are associated with the royal centres. These activities, as described above (pp 71-4), include royal meetings, the promulgation of laws, battles and possibly assemblies. It is possible that some of these activities were located at the royal centres for the reason that the negotiations conducted or laws proclaimed there may have been perceived to have been invested with greater authority by virtue of their association with monuments which symbolized royal power and conferred the legitimacy of the past.

Of interest here are those mythological entries towards the beginning of the *Annals of the Four Masters* which purport to record events before the advent of contemporary historical recording (on which see pp 39-40). The royal centres feature prominently in these mythological entries in connection with events such as battles, and the deaths, murders and deposings of kings. Some, at least, of these activities are similar to those with which the royal centres are associated during the early historic period, as recorded in the annals.



These entries appear to have the intention of projecting back into the past the socio-political significance with which these monuments were invested during the early historic period. By doing so, they apparently seek to promote the symbolic significance of the royal centres, and hence the legitimacy of the early historic provincial over-kings associated with them, by investing within them an immemorial, mystified, and therefore unchallengeable, quality. The reasons why these over-kingships found it necessary to do this will be considered in the concluding section, in which the historical context of the *cóiceda* will be assessed (pp 114-6). Firstly, however, it is necessary to consider the cosmological nature of the five-fold division of Ireland.

### *Cóiceda*, Cosmology and Ideology

The five-fold political division which supposedly existed in Ireland before the emergence of the *Uí Néill* dynasties in the fifth and sixth centuries is anomalous in many respects. This division appears to have retained its relevance and, as the literary sources reveal, impressed itself upon the consciousness of at least the learned professions of the early historic period, if not the population in general. Indeed, the wider currency and lasting nature of this scheme would appear to be attested by the fact that Ireland is still perceived to comprise "fifths" (p 113). Yet this five-fold division did not relate to the actual political geography of the early historic period. What is more remarkable, perhaps, is that a scheme such as this, which the literary sources present - and many historians accept - as being of immemorial antiquity and central importance to the political

organization of early Ireland; should be of such uncertain and ambiguous form with regard to the identification of the fifth *cóiced*.

Other anomalies abound. *Mide*, as the central *cóiced*, and that associated with both the kingship of Tara and the later, nominal, high-kingship of Ireland, appears to have been of pre-eminent status. However, it is thought to have been under the domination of *Ulaíd* and *Laigin* at different times during the Iron Age (MacNeill 1919:120-4, 129), before being occupied by the southern *Uí Néill*, who were supposedly of *Connacht* origin (ibid:118-20, 124-6). The status of *Ulaíd*, prior to the early historic period and the ascendancy of the northern *Uí Néill*, is also problematic. Then, *Ulaíd* supposedly comprised the totality of the north of Ireland, all six counties of the present Northern Ireland as well as counties Donegal, Cavan and Monaghan. If there were periods when *Ulaíd* held sway over *Mide*, then this *cóiced* must have represented a most powerful and extensive political unit (fig 3). Is one then to believe that, as early as the mid-sixth century, *Ulaíd* power had been eclipsed to the extent that, though still clinging to the status of a *cóiced*, its territory had been reduced to that area east of the River Bann, which now comprises the modern counties Antrim and Down (fig 1)? As a result, Navan Fort, allegedly the royal centre of *Ulaíd*, did not even lie within *Ulaíd*, but within the territory of *Airgialla* (pp 172, 175-7). If this was the case, then early historic *Ulaíd* could have represented only a shadow of its Iron Age predecessor. Reflecting this, "A *Cóiced* - the Fifth par excellence - was a term popular with the *Ulaíd*, asserting defiantly the previous extent of their kingdom" (Byrne 1973:108). It is in these contrasts - the status of *Mide* and the extent



of *Ulaíd* - that the key to the origins and significance of the *cóiceda* lie.

Cosmology is used here to denote the study of the world or universe as a spatially and temporally ordered whole. That the five-fold division of Ireland represents a cosmological scheme was first suggested by Guénon (third ed 1950:79) in 1927 on the basis of the spatial organization of the *cóiceda* and on analogy with similar phenomena among other societies:

*C'est l'Irlande, en effet, qui, parmi les pays celtiques, fournit le plus grand nombre de données relatives à l'Omphalos; elle était autrefois divisée en cinq royaumes, dont l'un portait le nom de Mide... qui est l'ancien mot celtique medion, "milieu", identique au latin medius. Ce royaume de Mide, qui avait été formé de portions prélevées sur les territoires des quatre autres, était devenu l'apanage propre du roi suprême d'Irlande, auquel les autres rois étaient subordonnés.*

The spatial organization of the *cóiceda* conforms to a pattern of four quarters, or peripheral fifths, and a fifth, central, *cóiced*, *Mide*. On the basis of their location within the scheme, which is based on the relative positions of the *cóiceda* within Ireland, each *cóiced* may be associated with a cardinal point: *Ulaíd* - north, *Laigin* - east, *Mumu* - south, *Connacht* - west. The fifth cardinal point, associated with the central *cóiced* - *Mide*, is the *axis mundi* ("world axis"), a potent symbol in many societies and one which confirms the pre-eminent status of this *cóiced*. This form of cosmological ordering is a common one and is found throughout the world (Lethaby 1892:53-70; Durkheim and Mauss 1902:56; Hocart 1924; Rees and Rees 1961:118-45 and refs). An analogy which is close in time and space is that of the geographical disposition and nomenclature of the Saxon kingdoms which gave rise to the names Middlesex, Essex, Sussex and Wessex.

The cosmological scheme of the Irish fifths is expressed as a microcosm in later mythology, such as the Middle Irish (ie eleventh or twelfth century) *Cath Muigi Rath* ("The Battle of Mag Rath"), in which the whole is reproduced within the centre (trans Marstrander 1911a:233):

And he [Domnall] summoned the men of Ireland to this feast at Tara (*fesi Temrach*). A couch was prepared for Domnall in the midst of the royal palace (*righthaigi*) at Tara and afterwards the host were seated. The men of Munster in the southern quarter (*ceathromain deisceartaig*) of the house. The men of Connaught in the western part of the house. The men of Ulster in the northern (*thuaiscert*). The men of Leinster in the eastern side of it. The centre of Ireland (*Medon Erenn*) around Domnall in that house. Thus was the court made. The King of Leinster (*rig Laigen*) on the couch opposite in the east, the King of Munster (*ri Muman*) on his right hand, the King of Connacht (*ri Conacht*) at his back, the King of Ulster (*ri Ulad*) on his left hand.

This is a phenomenon which will be encountered again, and considered in greater detail, in chapter five (pp 335-43, 353).

However, the cosmological scheme to which the *cóiceda* belong is more than just spatial in character. This is indicated by the middle Irish tale *Suidigud tellaig Temra* (ed and trans Best 1910) and a ninth century poem (Todd 1848:250-3; Rees and Rees 1961:131) which attribute specific properties or attributions to each cardinal point and, by implication, to their corresponding *cóiceda* (ibid:119-32). These are listed in *Suidigud tellaig Temra* in the form of the interrogation of a learned man, a common convention within Old and Middle Irish literature (trans Best 1910:147): "... and Ireland, how has it been partitioned, where have things been therein?'. 'Easy to say', said Fintan, 'knowledge (*fis*) in the west, battle (*cath*) in the north, prosperity (*bláth*) in the east, music (*seís*) in the south, kingship (*flaith*) in the centre''. The source then goes on to list the subsidiary properties of each *cóiced*. From these properties, Rees and Rees (1961:123-32) attribute "functions" which are based on idealized social classes to each *cóiced*: Connacht -



priests, *Ulaíd* - warriors, *Laigin* - farmers, *Mumu* - serfs, and *Mide* - kings.

Rees and Rees (1961:152) state that "We know of no direct evidence connecting the divisions of Ireland... with the calendar. But it should be remembered that the very division of the year into *four* seasons, like the division of a land into four quarters, is an *idea* and not a natural phenomenon". They then go on to relate how the construction of the hall in *Fled Bricrend* (trans Gantz 1981:221; quoted above, p 74) and the court of Conchobar, king of *Ulaíd*, in *Scéla Conchobair maic Nessa* ("The Tale of Conchobar mac Nessa"; trans Stokes 1910:27) embody a calendrical symbolism:

Three hundred, three score and five persons in Conchobar's household - that is, the number of days in the year is the number of men that were in Conchobar's household. Among them was a partnership - namely, a man to victual them every night, so that the first to feed them on that night, would come again at the end of the year.

Indeed, although it is not explicitly stated, the properties ascribed to the *cóiceda* also suggest that each *cóiced* was associated with a season of the year. For example, three of the secondary properties of the West (ie *Connacht*) are bounty (*gart*), abundance (*imed*), and wealth (*indmus*), suggesting its association with autumn, the harvest season, although admittedly Rees and Rees associate the function of the farmer with *Laigin*. Similarly, the placing of battle in the north may imply the existence of a link between *Ulaíd*, which is associated with the function of the warrior, and winter, the season of hosting. Thus, it would seem that these attributes and associations combine to form a highly complex cosmological scheme in which each *cóiced* is spatially, temporally and socially defined.

This cosmological ordering is entirely abstract in form, and, in particular, those slightly later (ie eleventh or twelfth century) sources which attribute functions to the *cóiceda* would appear to be scholarly elaborations. Nevertheless, the basic scheme - four peripheral *cóiceda* and one central *cóiced* - seems to be directly related to the politics of early historic Ireland, as Guenon (1950:79) observes. However, this type of spatial ordering is probably not one which could arise arbitrarily through processes of piecemeal territorial expansion or political centralization. Rather, because it embraces the whole of Ireland, it would appear to represent a cosmological scheme which was conceived and imposed without necessarily corresponding to the realities of political geography.

Nevertheless, this scheme does embody political aspirations and is therefore of ideological significance. For instance, the pre-eminent status of *Mide*, as the central *cóiced*, must be appraised against the background of *Uí Néill* attempts to create and monopolize a high-kingship of Ireland during the early historic period. That incipient high-kingship was closely associated with Tara and, in part, appears to have derived its legitimacy by appropriating and transforming the archaic institution of the kingship of Tara (see Byrne 1969; 1973:48-105; pp 45-6, above, for the background to this). Apparently in furtherance of these aspirations, Tara is often depicted in literary sources of the early historic period as the seat of an immemorial high-kingship of Ireland, while the function attributed to the centre, and by implication to *Mide*, in *Suidigud tellaig Temra* is kingship, with the secondary properties of primacy (*oireochuss*), principality (*flaithemnas*) and high-kingship (*ardrígi*) (Best 1910:148-9). This cosmological scheme, at least



in this form, therefore appears to be closely associated with *Uí Néill* aspirations of creating and/or occupying a (nominal) high-kingship of Ireland (pp 124-6).

The pre-eminent status of Tara and, by implication, of the nascent high-kingship also, may be detected in one of the alternative traditions concerning the form and identity of the *cóiceda*. Tara is portrayed as the meeting place of the boundaries of the *cóiceda* in an early eleventh century topographical poem by Cuan Ua Lothchain: "The boundaries of each province (*cóiccidh*) from the hill [ie, of Tara]" (trans Petrie 1838: 144). Tara is also portrayed as the centre of Ireland in other Middle Irish sources, such as *Cath Muige Rath* (ed and trans Marstrander 1911a: 233), *Fled Dúin na nGed* ("The Feast of *Dún na nGed*") (trans Dillon 1946: 58,61) and *Suidigud tellaig Temra* (p 110). Although these are later (ie eleventh or twelfth century) sources, it seems likely that they perpetuate an earlier tradition, from which they would presumably have derived their credibility and appeal. Regardless of this, they are worth citing because they provide additional evidence for one of the intrinsic characteristics of cosmological schemes, which is that they exist in different forms.

One of the alternative cosmological schemes which relates to early historic Ireland, and in which an ideological influence may also be detected, is that of five *cóiceda* whose boundaries meet at *Uisnech*. *Suidigud tellaig Temra* relates how Trefuilngid Treorchair allegedly established "... the progression of the stories and chronicles of the hearth of Tara itself with the four quarters round about..." (trans Best 1910:145). However, another mythological character, Fintan mac Bochra, is later asked to adjudicate on the extent of the "manor of Tara"

(*tellaig Temra*), which is apparently the royal domain of Tara and

seemingly symbolizes the fifth, and central, *cóiced* (ibid:153,155):

Then the nobles of Ireland came as we have related to accompany Fintan to Usnech, and they took leave of one another on the top of Usnech. And he set up in their presence a pillar stone of five ridges on the summit of Usnech. And he assigned a ridge of it to every province (*cóiced*) in Ireland, for thus are Tara and Usnech in Ireland, as its two kidneys are in a beast. And he marked out a *forrach*, there, that is, the portion of each province in Usnech....

So Fintan then testified that it was right to take the five provinces (*cóicead*) of Ireland from Tara and Usnech, and that it was right for them to be taken from each province in Ireland.

Echoing this scheme, Giraldus Cambrensis, the Welsh-Norman historian, in his *Topographia Hiberniae* (bk 3:§88; ed Dimock 1867:144; trans O'Meara 1982:96) of c 1284-86, states that the stone at *Uisnech*, "... *umbilicus Hiberniae dicitur, quasi in medio et meditullio terrae positus*" ("... is said to be the navel of Ireland, as it were, placed right in the middle of the land").

The significance of the episode in *Suidigud tellaig Temra* would appear to be that it is attempting to transfer to *Uisnech* the status which was previously accorded to Tara within one of the cosmological schemes, that of the meeting point of the five peripheral fifths (ie within the scheme which incorporates two Munsters). A political context and an ideological motive may be identified for this. MacNeill (1919: 111-2) states that this scheme may be dismissed as a reflection of an eleventh and twelfth century political reality. This, however, is not how cosmological schemes operate. Ideology does not simply reflect a pre-existing reality, but seeks to legitimize and promote aspirant authority.

Uisneach is a figure-of-eight shaped earthwork enclosure (fig 10).

Excavation produced artefactual evidence of Iron Age and Medieval



activity, perhaps attesting occupation during the latter period (Macalister and Praeger 1929), although the relationship of that activity with the enclosure, if any, was not established. No evidence of early historic period activity was recovered (Wailes 1982:18-9) and "... little was found to support the identification of the site as a royal residence..." (Macalister and Praeger 1929:116), although the excavation techniques employed were presumably unsophisticated by modern standards. Despite this, Uisneach was apparently of importance during the early historic period because the kings of *Clann Cholmáin* took the title *rig Uisnig* ("kings of Uisnech") from the site (Byrne 1973:87). It is possible that, like the royal centres of the *coiceda*, Uisneach was not the residence of the kings of *Clann Cholmáin* but may have been a monument invested with symbolic meaning and ideological significance.

The importance accorded to Uisneach in this alternative cosmology may be related to the fact that, from 728, except for a brief period in the mid-tenth century, *Clann Cholmáin* monopolized the high-kingship of the southern *Uí Néill* (Byrne 1973:87). As the (titular) high-kingship of Ireland alternated between the over-kings of the northern and southern *Uí Néill*, *Clann Cholmáin* supplied several high-kings of Ireland from the mid-eighth century. This, then, is presumably why the *coiceda* are represented in some sources as meeting at Uisneach. As a dynasty whose over-king frequently also held the high-kingship of Ireland, the rulers of *Clann Cholmáin* sought to legitimize this position by portraying the monument with which they were symbolically associated as being located at the centre of Ireland. The ideological significance of the concept of the Centre is also reflected by the fact that three eighth century *Clann Cholmáin* kings, including two high-kings of Ireland, possessed the

epithet *Midi* - Murchad Midi (ob 715), Dommall Midi (ob 763) and Donnchad Midi (ob 797). By reinforcing their association with "the middle" (ie of Ireland), and the pre-eminent *cóiced*, these kings were attempting to legitimize not only their over-kingship of the southern *Uí Néill*, but presumably also their tenure of the high-kingship of Ireland.

The *cóiceda*, therefore, are abstract in nature, the products of a scheme which is cosmological in form and ideological in significance. This explains why the identification of the fifth *cóiced* has been surrounded with confusion. The various forms which the five-fold cosmological division of Ireland took during the early historic period, primarily the alternative between the existence of *Mide* or a second *Mumu* as the fifth *cóiced*, may now be recognized as having arisen not from confusion over, or ignorance about, the original form and identification of the *cóiceda*, but because the scheme represents an ideological construct. Within this, the *cóiceda* were not formalized, or "real", political or territorial entities which remained static, but, as cosmological phenomena, were open to interpretation, transformation and manipulation through time. *Suidigud tellaig Temra* attests one of those transformations, from five peripheral *cóiceda* whose boundaries meet at Tara, to one where their boundaries meet at Uisneach, and a political context for this can be identified as early as the mid-eighth century.

A distinction must be made between the *cóiceda*, which represent abstract divisions within a cosmological scheme, and the provincial over-kingdoms of the early historic period, which represent concrete political entities. The contrast between the two types of unit - *cóiceda* (cosmological) and provincial over-kingdom (political) - may be attributed to the fact that ideological structures do not map "real",



"existing" structures of power. Cosmological schemes are not reflective in nature, but rather, as a means of promoting political aspirations, seek to portray an idealized scheme, as it was perceived it *should* exist. As a consequence, cosmological schemes tend to be fluid in nature, according to the political context in which they are employed and the aspirations which are sought to be fulfilled. Indeed, the mutating nature of the *cóiceda* may be emphasized by the fact that Ireland today is perceived to comprise only four "provinces", though they are still referred to in (modern) Irish as *cúigeadha*, "fifths".

Although the five-fold cosmological division of Ireland as an entity does not correspond with the political reality of the early historic period, some individual *cóiceda*, namely *Laigin*, *Mumu* and *Connacht*, appear to be more or less coterminous with the over-kingships of the same name. Here it may be noted that it is not only the cosmological scheme as a whole which was of ideological significance, but also its individual components. One manifestation of this is the literary sources which seek to explain the origins and nomenclature of the *cóiceda*. *Lebor gabála* (trans Macalister 1941:12-3,26-9,60-3,72-5), for example, attributes the foundation of the *cóiceda* to the five brothers of the mythological *Fir Bolg*, whose arrival in Ireland was the third of five primeval invasions. Another aspect of this is the creation of eponymous ancestors for the *cóiceda*. *Ulaid*, *Laigin* and *Connachta* are population names (Byrne 1973:46) and the latter two are allegedly eponymous in nature: the *Connachta* traced their ancestry to Conn Cetchathach and the *Laigin* to Laigne Lethan-glas (Rees and Rees 1961: 125; Byrne 1973:46).

It is probably no coincidence that *Connacht* and *Laigin* are two of the three *cóiceda* whose extents, as determined by the cosmological five-fold ordering, conform most closely to the territories of the early historic provincial over-kingdoms. (The third, *Mumu*, has a geographical name). These origin myths sought to reinforce the immemorial antiquity of those *cóiceda* which existed as political realities - as provincial over-kingships - during the early historic period, emphasizing their unchallengeable nature and, by implication, that of their rulers, whose power and position this cosmological scheme sought to legitimise. It is doubtful, however, if it is within such a context that the origins of this cosmological scheme may be sought, and this will now be considered.

#### The Origins and Date of the *Cóiceda*

Traditionally, the *cóiceda* have been interpreted as the oldest political divisions within Ireland (MacNeill 1919:101,112; p 62, above). However, the dating of this five-fold division to the beginning of the first millennium AD may now appear to be untenable because of its reliance upon mythological sources. Instead, the cosmological form and ideological significance of the *cóiceda*, and the distinction between them and the early historic provincial over-kingdoms, suggests that the date at which this five-fold division originated may be in need of re-appraisal.

The evidence discussed above suggests that the *cóiceda* had an ideological significance during the early historic period. This may imply that, at the beginning of the early historic period, the provincial over-kingdoms represented a comparatively new form or level of political organization, which could not be maintained by force alone.



As Byrne (1971:135) remarks, "... it is only by the eighth century that the provincial kings seem to be approaching a situation in which they can wield effective authority over their sub-kings". Before that date, the legitimacy of the over-kingships may have been sought by projecting their origins into the immemorial past, portraying them as having been founded by eponymous ancestors, and by giving their over-kingdoms a form which based their existence on a natural or metaphysical order. Control of this cosmological order, as tales such as *Suidigud tellaig Temra* indicate, was perceived to lie beyond the influence of worldly powers and therefore imbued the over-kingships with an unchallengeable aura.

That the power of the provincial over-kingships was only consolidated by the eighth century suggests that, as an ideological strategy and a means of legitimation, the cosmological scheme of the *cóiceda* may have been employed during, say, the previous century or two. In support of this, the symbolic and spatial organization of Armagh may attest the existence of the five-fold division as early as the mid-seventh century (p 350). However, for this cosmological scheme to have had any ideological validity during the early historic period, it would need to have drawn on a pre-existing order. This is because ideology is not suddenly created, but rather "... it comes from the past" (Bloch 1985:44-5). Despite this, it is difficult to imagine the five-fold cosmological scheme originating in the Iron Age. This is because its ideological function and political context clearly lie in the early historic period and it is unlikely that this cosmological scheme would exist without it relating to an ideology which reflected genuine political aspirations. The existence of the cosmological scheme may be attributed to the attempts of the rulers of apparently newly-emergent

provincial over-kingdoms to gain legitimacy for their position. As these over-kingdoms were only consolidating their power by the eighth century, it seems unlikely that this scheme was in existence before the commencement of the early historic period.

This case may be supported by the evidence of the laws of status, a group of seventh and eighth century law tracts which seek to define, in a rather idealized manner, a hierarchy of social ranks which are determined by birth and property qualifications. It is commonly believed that the highest rank of kingship attested in these laws is that of the *rí cóicid* (Byrne 1973:42): "The laws [of status] agree in recognising a third and highest grade of king, variously called *triath*, *réthe*, *ollam rí* ('greatest of kings'), *rí ruirech* ('king of over-kings'), or *rí cóiced* ('King of a Fifth', ie of one of the provinces into which Ireland was traditionally divided)" (cf Binchy 1954:54; Byrne 1971:135).

However, the early eighth century *Críth gablach* ("Branched Purchase") (S117; trans MacNeill 1923:301), for instance, defines the highest rank of kingship not as *rí cóicid*, but *rí ruirech*. It is assumed by both Ó Corráin (1972:28) and Byrne (1973:42; quoted above) that the rank of *rí ruirech* is synonymous with that of *rí cóicid*. However, nowhere is this stated or established, and it seems odd that an apparently general term such as *rí ruirech* should have been used to denote what appears to have been a specific rank of kingship, albeit one associated with a cosmological "kingdom", that of a *cóiced*. The absence of the rank of *rí cóicid* from the laws of status leads Binchy (1970:32) to suggest that:

... although the idea of a division of Ireland into 'five provinces' is certainly very ancient, it is more doubtful that five 'over-kingdoms' whose rulers exercised political hegemony over all the *ruirig* (and hence over their subordinate *rí*) within the area of each province had already been established in the archaic



society described in the law-tracts. Hence the original *rí ruirech* may simply have been any king who was powerful enough to obtain the submissions of a number of *ruirig*, and the restriction of the title to a provincial king (*rí cóicid*) may represent a somewhat later development.

This conclusion is apparently supported by the seventh or eighth century *Uraicecht becc* ("Small Primer") (§56; trans MacNeill 1923:281). In this, the *rí cóicid* is defined as the second highest rank, with the highest being the *ollam uas rí* ("master over kings"). The example of an *ollam uas rí* which is given is *rí Muman* ("king of *Mumu*"), which may be identified with the over-kingship of *Mumu*. The definition of the rank of *rí Muman* in this law tract, which is of Munster provenance (Binchy 1958b), suggests that it may be a means of seeking legitimacy for a rank which did not, at that time, possess the power with which to exercise over-kingship throughout *Mumu* (cf p 121). The laws of status make it clear that the *tuath*, and not the *cóiced*, was the elemental political unit at the commencement of the early historic period (Byrne 1971:135): "... the laws... regard the petty tribal king as the norm of their *politeia*". This appears to have been the case even though the autonomy of the *tuath* was under erosion as a result of processes of political centralization from an early date within the early historic period (Binchy 1970:36-7; Charles-Edwards 1972:117-22; Ó Corráin 1972:29-32; 1978:9-10; Wormald 1986:165).

To illustrate that the provincial over-kingships did not emerge until the early historic period, one *cóiced* and its royal centre, which have scarcely featured in this discussion so far, may be considered. In many respects, *Mumu* is the anomalous *cóiced* and over-kingship (Rees and Rees 1961:133-7; Byrne 1973:165). Although *Mumu* comprises a discrete entity throughout the early historic period (ibid:169), this it appears

to have done largely in terms of its political domination by the *Eóganachta*, a group of dynasties which claimed descent from a common ancestor. However, no single dynasty monopolized power within *Mumu*, and the over-kingship was held by kings of six different *Eóganacht* dynasties during the course of the early historic period (Byrne 1973:203):

The kingship of Cashel was... a very loose hegemony operating under rules proper to the archaic and tribal stage of Irish society. The genealogy of the *Eóganacht Chaisil* in particular shows a singular lack of dynastic cohesion. The *Eoganachta* were scattered over the whole of Munster so that their domination of the province was assured. But although some of their dynastic groups were more successful than others in winning the over-kingship, this remained very much an open contest.

The kingship of Cashel is, theoretically at least, synonymous with that of *Mumu* (Byrne 1973:165).

Power within *Mumu* appears to have been less centralized than it was within the other provincial over-kingdoms, with the result that many kingdoms and dynasties which were nominally subject to the *Eóganachta* still possessed a large degree of autonomy (Byrne 1973:180): "... the apparent looseness of the *Eóganacht* sway permitted tribes who in the normal Irish polity would have been mere *dáer-thuatha*, tributary kingdoms with local autonomy, to enjoy many privileges and retain some prestige. Three or four marcher kingdoms held extensive lands under very few obligations ...". The impression is that *Mumu* constituted a less cohesive political entity than the other provincial over-kingdoms and that its over-kingship may only have been created recently. The *Eóganacht* dynasties, therefore, were still in the process of extending their authority over kingdoms within *Mumu* well into the early historic period. Indeed, at least one *Eóganacht* dynasty, *Eóganacht Airthir Chliach*, was not founded until the sixth century (Binchy 1970:42).



*Mumu* is also anomalous in the sense that it does not appear to possess a royal centre of the type with which the other *cóiceda* are associated. The principal symbolic site within *Mumu* is *Caiseal* (Cashel). Cashel contrasts with the other royal centres because there is no evidence for it having been occupied by an Iron Age enclosure or any other prehistoric structure. Admittedly, later activity, in the form of the early historic and Medieval ecclesiastical foundation which occupies the Rock of Cashel (Commissioners 1908; Leask 1955:39,113; Evans 1966:194; Harbison 1970:223-4), could have destroyed any evidence of this (Wailes 1982:6). Also, a fibula of "Roman type", probably of first century AD date, has been found on the Rock (Cahill 1982), although nothing is known of the circumstances and date of either its deposition or discovery.

*Caisel* is widely considered to be an early loan-word derived from the Latin *castellum* (Binchy 1958c; Ó Corráin 1974:69; Warner 1988a:59; but see the doubts expressed in Greene 1972:232). Some historians (Binchy 1970:39; MacNiocaill 1972:5; Byrne 1973:72,183-4) have concluded - but in the absence of any concrete evidence - that the name was derived as a result of contacts between *Mumu* and Roman Britain, thereby indicating that the Rock was occupied by a secular fort during the Iron Age. However, Latin loan-words in Irish tend to be associated with the Church (Richter 1988:47-8) because Latin was the language of liturgy and - at least initially - of textual recording, and literacy was a monopoly of the Church during the early historic period. The name *Caisel* was presumably applied to ecclesiastical sites because of their tendency to be enclosed, sometimes within a stone wall (Ní Chatháin et al 1968: col 51) and its application to secular sites may only be secondary and

later. That Cashel was an important ecclesiastical foundation throughout the early historic period suggests that its name, and possibly origin, may derive from its occupation as a religious site.

Moreover, the Christian status of the site may be reflected in the absence of its association with mythology of an ostensibly pagan character (Binchy 1970:40) and in the Christian character of *Senchas fobhála Caisil* ("The Story of the Finding of Cashel") (ed and trans Dillon 1952; Sproule 1985:26). This is the origin myth of Cashel, in which the site is pointed out by angels and the future kings of Cashel are blessed by God (cf pp 294-5, 297, 325). This myth appears to be an attempt to legitimize the significance of the site by establishing its antiquity and the special, sacred, circumstances surrounding its discovery. The implication is that Cashel had, or it was sought to be portrayed as having had, no history prior to its occupation as a Christian site (Byrne 1973:72; Sproule 1985:23).

Cashel, however, did have a secular dimension. The *Eóganacht Chaisil*, who occupied the territory around Cashel, appear to have derived their name from the site, although its fortification does not appear to be attested until after their power had been eclipsed by *Dál Cais* (AI sa 995): "The fortifying (?) of Caisel, Inis Locha Gair, and Inis Locha Sainglenn, and many structures besides, by Brian" (trans MacAirt 1951:171). Thus, while Cashel was of symbolic significance to *Mumu* in general, its importance may have originated with the *Eóganacht Chaisil*, but, if the significance of the name is interpreted correctly, only after its occupation as an ecclesiastical site. Cashel may have been a residence of the over-kings of *Mumu* because, although the



*Eóganacht Chaisil* did not monopolize the over-kingship, the kingship of Cashel was synonymous with that of *Mumu*.

This evidence suggests that the symbolic and political significance of Cashel does not pre-date its occupation as an ecclesiastical site, implying that *Mumu* did not emerge as a discrete political unit, a provincial over-kingdom, until after the conversion. Christianity appears to have played a prominent role in the centralization of power which the creation of the over-kingship of *Mumu* attests, even if that power was weaker and less centralized than those of the other provincial over-kingships. Thus, more over-kings of *Mumu* than of any other province held both royal and ecclesiastical office simultaneously (Byrne 1973: 178, 213-4). This suggests not that these provincial over-kings were *more* powerful (pace Hughes 1966: 211-4, 221-2), but perhaps the opposite, that they had to occupy positions of both secular and ritual authority in an attempt to legitimize their position and exert power throughout the province. However, by the ninth and tenth centuries, the tenure of both ecclesiastical and royal office results in the emergence of powerful kings such as the bishop-king Cormac mac Cuilennáin (ob 908).

The implications of this for the manner in which the other early historic provincial over-kingships were created, and the date(s) at which this occurred, are uncertain. That the example of *Mumu* is of wider relevance is suggested by the fact that the over-kingship of *Mumu* and its royal centre, for all their differences, do share some central features with those of the other provincial over-kingships. For example, some over-kings of *Laigin* also held high ecclesiastical office (Byrne 1973: 151-2). In addition, the dynasties which monopolized most of the provincial over-kingships usually also supplied the senior clerics of

the major ecclesiastical foundations within their over-kingdoms, something which is particularly marked in *Laigin* (Hughes 1966:84; Byrne 1973:178,213-4). Also, the joint ecclesiastical and royal status of Cashel may reflect the combined tenure of both royal and ecclesiastical office in *Mumu*, but may be paralleled by the close spatial relationship which exists between other royal centres and important ecclesiastical sites, for instance, that of Armagh and Navan Fort (pp 186-89).

The relationship between secular and ritual authority suggests that the Church played a fundamental role in either the emergence and/or legitimation of the early historic over-kingships. The precise nature of that role and of the relationship between the Church and the provincial over-kingships, however, are uncertain. In particular, the centralization of political power must be recognised as a very complex process in which many different factors are involved. It cannot be ascertained, therefore, whether the conversion was one factor which enabled the provincial over-kingdoms to be created, or whether Christianity provided another means by which a pre-existing process of political centralization could be strengthened and legitimized.

Indeed, it may be postulated that the Church played a central role in the creation, maintenance and dissemination of the cosmology of the *cóiceda*. For instance, textual sources appear to have played an active role in the promotion of the concept of the *cóiceda* and, as the Church held a virtual monopoly of the knowledge and materials of literacy during the early historic period, these may be products of monastic *scriptoria*. This may be reflected in the possible ecclesiastical context of composition of some epic literature, in which the *cóiceda* feature prominently (pp 183-6). Indeed, the annals, which are more certainly the



product of an ecclesiastical milieu (pp 33-4), make frequent reference to the *cóiceda*. This is done within the context of the early historic provincial over-kingships and in a manner which may suggest that the annals were actively engaged in projecting the immemorial antiquity of those political units. More tangible, however, is the spatial organization of the early historic ecclesiastical settlement of Armagh (pp 249-88). This appears to replicate the cosmological scheme of the five-fold division of Ireland and invest the constituent elements with meaning and value in such a manner as to suggest that it constitutes an ideological construct of the Church in general and Armagh in particular (pp 327-69).

Regardless of their origins, it seems likely that the provincial over-kingdoms did not constitute discrete *political* entities until after the conversion. By that period, the emergence of new groups of dynasties, the *Uí Néill* and *Airgialla*, ensured that the political geography of Ireland did not correspond to the five-fold cosmological scheme of the *cóiceda*. Indeed, this is perhaps the major outstanding anomaly of this attribution of the *cóiceda* as a cosmological scheme to the early historic period. If this scheme is a product of the early historic period, then why does it comprise a five-fold and not a seven-fold division? A number of possible interpretations may be postulated. For instance, this cosmological scheme may have been intended to exclude the *Uí Néill* dynasties, perhaps because their obscure ancestry and swift ascent to power could have resulted in them being regarded as upstarts by the learned classes and by the provincial over-kings. Similarly, *Airgialla* may have been omitted from the scheme because of its vague origins and its subordinate status. *Airgialla* not only came under *Uí Néill* hegemony during the early historic period, but its name means

"those who give hostages" and "... it seems clear that the story of the three Collas is a piece of genealogical gilding designed to disguise their essential subordination. Their ineligibility for the kingship of Tara... gives the game away" (Byrne 1973:73; cf pp 175-6, below).

An alternative, and perhaps more attractive, interpretation is to admit the hand of the *Uí Néill* behind the scheme. Although the *Uí Néill* do not ostensibly feature in the five-fold cosmological division of Ireland, they may have had at least an interest in it because of the pivotal role of the centre within the scheme. Whether as four peripheral *cóiceda* with *Mide* as the centre, or five peripheral *cóiceda* with either Tara or Uisneach at the centre, the concept of the centre constituted the linch-pin of this cosmological scheme. In addition, all these centres are associated with the high-kingship of Ireland. Tara is portrayed as the seat of the kingship of Tara, which, mythological or not, appears to have formed the basis of a *Uí Néill*-created high-kingship of Ireland (pp 45-6). The high-kingship, therefore, came to be specifically associated with Tara. Tara's pre-eminent position, for example, is reflected in sources such as Muirchu's seventh century *Vita Sancti Patricii* (I 10(9).(1); ed and trans Bieler 1979:74-5), in which he refers to "... *rex quidam magnus ferox gentilisque imperator barbarorum regnans in Temoria, quae [tunc] erat caput [regni] Scotorum* ..." ("... a great king, a fierce pagan, an emperor of non-Romans, with his royal seat at Tara, which was then the capital of the realm of the Irish"). Similarly, *Mide* is also associated with the high-kingship, partly because Tara lies within *Mide*, but also as a result of its pre-eminence as the central *cóiced*. The role of a *Uí Néill* dynasty in conceiving and promoting the third cosmological scheme, that of five



peripheral fifths whose boundaries meet at Uisneach, has already been discussed (pp 109-12), and this would appear to attest the active role of the *Uí Néill* in employing cosmology in their ideology of the concept, and legitimacy, of a high-kingship of Ireland.

Thus, although the five-fold cosmological division ostensibly appears to exclude the *Uí Néill* dynasties, it seems that they were the principal beneficiaries of this scheme. For the five-fold division to have been conceived with the intention of demonstrating the antiquity of those provincial over-kingships which emerged during the early historic period introduces problems regarding the identification of the originators of the scheme. Alternatively, and the identification of the political context and motives of the scheme in which the *cóiceda* meet at Uisneach would appear to support this, it is possible that the five-fold division of Ireland in all its forms is a *Uí Néill* product. The different forms of cosmological division may then be attributed to internal changes in *Uí Néill* dynastic politics through time, as exemplified, perhaps, by the apparent association of *Clann Cholmáin* high-kings of Ireland with the cosmological scheme of five *coiceda* whose boundaries meet at Uisnech (pp 109-112). If this is the case, then these cosmological schemes may be associated specifically with *Uí Néill* attempts to legitimize the concept of a high-kingship of Ireland. This the schemes did by projecting the five-fold division of Ireland as the natural order of things and as being of immemorial antiquity. If this was indeed the case, then in the latter respect the *Uí Néill* have been singularly successful, as the *cóiceda* are still widely believed to represent the political geography of Iron Age Ireland.

The ideological strength of this cosmological order, therefore, was that it was deliberately set in a mythological past which pre-dated the emergence of the ascendant *Uí Néill* dynasties. Indeed, in this context, the term which historians of the early historic period gave to that earlier era, *aimser na cóicedach* ("the time of the kings of the fifths") (O'Rahilly 1946:177), may be interpreted as referring not simply to a period before the emergence of the *Uí Néill* and *Airgialla* dynasties and the demise of the five-fold division of Ireland, but to a past to which it was sought to create the impression that the *cóiceda* belonged. Members of the learned professions, including historians, worked under royal patronage during the early historic and Medieval periods (Ó Cuív 1963; Williams 1971; Carney 1973; Byrne 1974). These professions controlled traditional learning, but did not merely preserve and unthinkingly transmit such learning. Rather, the professional orders were important to the maintenance and legitimation of royal authority because they were actively engaged in the propagation and dissemination of the ideology of kingship. The five-fold cosmological division of Ireland appears to be an example of this.

In conclusion, the provincial over-kingships may be identified as the highest level of political organization of the early historic period. In contrast, the *cóiceda* may be identified as a cosmological phenomenon and a product of the early historic period. This cosmological scheme is ideological in inspiration and seeks, by portraying the *cóiceda* as political units of immemorial antiquity, to demonstrate the legitimacy of either the nascent, or newly emergent, provincial kingships, or, more probably, the *Uí Néill*-created and monopolized concept of a high-kingship of Ireland. One of the primary ways in which



the great antiquity of the *cóiceda* and their over-kingships is demonstrated is through epic literature, such as the tales of the Ulster Cycle, which project the *cóiceda* as political units and their kings into a distant and mythological past.

The other important manner in which the immemorial antiquity of the *cóiceda* and their kingships is demonstrated is through monuments - the royal centres. The antiquity and royal associations of these sites appear to have been conveyed through their portrayal in the epic literature, by their physical appearance, and by their use as the foci of various royal activities. Indeed, the royal centres are integral to the concept and the scheme of the *cóiceda*. As Byrne (1973:135; quoted above, p 99) states, they were "emblematic capitals", symbols of over-kingship, and the physical basis upon which the legitimacy of the provincial over-kingships was established. The ideological significance of these monuments was drawn from their portrayal as being firmly rooted in the past and was impressed upon the consciousness of subjects by their royal associations, both present and past, real and imagined. As well as this, the royal centres constitute the physical manifestation of what otherwise exists only as an abstract, cosmological scheme, the *cóiceda*, and the *cóiceda* comprise a fundamental element within the ideology of both the provincial over-kingships and the high-kingship of early historic Ireland.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### NAVAN FORT AND ITS SECULAR AND ECCLESIASTICAL CONTEXTS

The importance accorded to Navan Fort is due partly to biases governing the evidence available. As one of the two royal centres which have been (partially) excavated to modern standards, Navan Fort attracts attention by the quality and quantity of the evidence which it has yielded. Its location within a "ritual landscape" (Mallory nd a) or "ritual complex" (Warner 1986:5), comprising a concentration of other sites and the find-spot of the Loughnashade Iron Age horns (p 4), reinforces the significance which archaeologists have attached to the monument and its environs (but see pp 386-9). This importance was reflected in the campaign to defeat the proposed extension of the quarry adjacent to Navan Fort (Selkirk 1985; Mallory nd a; 1987a; McNeill et al 1986), in the foundation of the Navan Research Group and its periodical, *Emania*, and the current proposals to create a "Navan at Armagh" visitor centre and archaeological park (NFIG 1988; cf Mallory 1987c).

Similarly, the breadth of literary references to Navan Fort - in epic literature, the *dindshenchas*, poetry and the annals - not only draws attention to the monument, but have traditionally been used to



interpret its function and date. While these sources may reflect the importance of Navan Fort during the period of their composition and transmission, they may introduce a bias into the study from their ready availability in translation and the dissemination of the findings of recent excavations. As a consequence, archaeologists may attach a significance to a site which is out of all proportion either to the importance it possessed during its period(s) of use, or to its contribution to the understanding of the period to which it belongs.

In terms of its literary profile and published excavation results, Navan Fort may fall into this category. Undoubtedly, the site was of great importance during the late Bronze Age/Iron Age, regardless of whether the enclosing earthworks are of Neolithic or later prehistoric construction (pp 89-91). This is demonstrated by the unusual nature and scale of the structures within its interior, and the labour which must have been required for their construction. However, this need not imply, contrary to the portrayal of the site in some literary sources and the significance which many archaeologists and historians have attached to it, that it was the most important site in Ulster. Rather, this is the status which the epic literature creates for the site, as the fortified royal capital of the kings of Ulster. In the previous chapter it is argued that the concept of the fortified royal courts of Iron Age provincial kings is an ideologically-inspired construction of the past belonging to the early historic period. The monuments upon which these constructs are based apparently were central to the legitimation of royal authority by constituting the undeniable, physical link between a provincial over-king and the (constructed) historical basis of his office and authority. Indeed, that Navan Fort may not be of unique size

and character, even within Co Armagh, may be inferred from the existence of another enclosure, the Dorsey, at least part of which is contemporary with the multiple timber ring structure at Navan Fort (Lynn nd; 1989).

However, it is not simply the quantity of, and the later historic gloss on, the evidence which makes Navan Fort and its ideological significance worthy of more detailed study. Navan Fort is of interest because literary sources suggest that it was of ideological significance not only in a secular context, but also an ecclesiastical one. As a result, Navan Fort (and Armagh) are of importance to the study of some of the processes which were identified in chapter one (pp 1-3) as characterizing early historic Ireland - political centralization, the conversion to Christianity, the nature of the relationship between secular and ecclesiastical authority and the creation of ecclesiastical primacy.

This chapter, examines the secular ideological meaning invested in Navan Fort. Possibly related to this meaning, Navan Fort plays a central role in the episodes of the Ulster Cycle, epic literature which has had a profound influence on not only the interpretation of Navan Fort, but also the study of Irish Iron Age society and that of the wider Celtic world. However, the ideological implications of these sources may be analyzed only after considering the nature, date and socio-political context of their composition. The ecclesiastical dimension of the investment of ideological meaning in Navan Fort is discussed towards the end of this chapter and is intended as a prelude to the analysis of the role of monuments and the construction of the past within an ecclesiastical context in part two.



## Navan Fort Within Secular Ideology

Navan Fort (IGR H 847450) occupies a low and rounded drumlin, but one which affords extensive views in all directions, in Navan townland, Co Armagh. As mentioned above (p 15), the site comprises a large earthwork enclosure, roughly circular in plan, 286 m in overall diameter and with an internal area of 4.9 ha (18 acres). Within the interior are a large mound and the denuded remains of an annular bank and ditch, and it is these features that excavation concentrated on (Selkirk 1970; Lynn 1986; forthcoming a; pp 85-88, above).

Excavation indicates that the most vigorous periods of structural activity on the site belong to the late Bronze Age and Iron Age and are not domestic, but ritual, in nature, while the enclosing earthworks are not defensive in character (pp 81-2). This may attest the site's status as a sacred enclosure (pp 89-91). However, the name Navan Fort is retained here because of its wide currency. This name is derived from the Old Irish *nEamhuin* ("the *Emain*") (Joyce 1869:90; on which see pp 187-8, below), thus providing a positive identification of the site with the *Emain Macha* of the literary sources. There is no archaeological evidence of either structural activity after the first century BC, or of any form of activity on the site during the early historic period. However, as the interior of the enclosure was only partially excavated, it is necessary to argue *ex silencio* on the absence of evidence relating to early historic period activity at Navan Fort. However, this may be justified on the grounds that it constitutes a valid interpretation of the evidence available at present and may be revised if and when further evidence comes to light (pp 91-4).

The ideological significance of Navan Fort within a secular context during the early historic period appears to be attested by historical and literary sources, and possibly also by archaeological evidence, although this is absent from the monument itself. The literary sources comprise primarily epic literature and will be considered below (pp 155-71). The historical sources consist mostly of annalistic entries of battles at, or near, Navan Fort, for example, the *Annals of Ulster*, sa 758 (trans MacAirt and MacNiocaill 1983:213):

The battle of Emain Macha in which Dungal grandson of Conaing and Donn Bo were slain. Fiachna son of Aedh Ron was victor.

This battle is also recorded in the *Annals of Inisfallen*, sa 759 (trans MacAirt 1951:111):

A battle between the Uí Neill and the Ulaid at Emain Macha, in which Dungal, grandson of Conaing... fell. Fiachra, king of Ulaid, was victor.

The next conflict in which *Emain Macha* is mentioned may have been more an attempt to plunder and/or lay waste an area to the south of Navan Fort, rather than a battle at the monument itself, although Navan Fort clearly forms an important point of reference within the landscape, a distinct place which was imbued with with a mytho-historical significance (AU sa 820; MacAirt and MacNiocaill 1983:277), "Int Airthir was laid waste as far as Emain Macha". This is also recorded in the

*Annals of the Four Masters*, sa 819 (trans O'Donovan 1856,1:431):

An army was led by Conchobar, son of Donnchadh, to Ardachadh of Sliabh Fuaid; and all the Airthera were devastated by him, as far as Eamhain-Macha.

Conchobar mac Donnchada (ob 833) was the high-king of the southern *Uí Néill* dynasty of *Clann Cholmáin*.

An invading army also appears to have visited Navan Fort in 1103 (AU sa 1103; trans MacCarthy 1893:71):

Great war between the Cenél nEógain and the Ulaid, so that Muirchertach Ua Briain came with the men of Munster and of Leinster and of Osraige and with the nobles of Connacht and with the men of



Meath, including their kings, to Magh Cobha, in aid of the Ulaid. Both [forces] went to the Plain of Ard Macha (namely, to Cill-na-Conraire), so that they were a week in leagurer against Ard Macha. Domnall Ua Lochlainn with the north of Ireland [was] during that space in Uí Bresail Macha, face against them. Howbeit, when the Men of Munster were tired out, Muirchertach went to Aenach Macha and to Emain and around to Ard Macha, so that he left eight ounces of gold upon the altar and promised eight score cows.

These events are also recorded in the *Annals of the Four Masters*, sa 1103 (trans O'Donovan 1856,2:974-5) and in the *Annals of Loch Cé*, sa 1103 (trans Hennessy 1871:90-3), in which it is stated that the armies which came to the aid of *Ulaid* "were a week laying seige to Ard Macha".

These entries may attest a phenomenon which was noted in chapter two (pp 71-2,101,177-8), that the royal centres, as physical symbols of the over-kingships with which they were associated, were obvious targets for hostile over-kingdoms and therefore the scenes of battles. Although these examples are not perhaps as unequivocal or as numerous as those concerning some of the other royal centres (cf pp 71-2), they do appear to comprise further manifestations of the symbolic status invested in the royal centres, as noted in chapter two (pp 70-9).

It appears that the royal centres retained their symbolic significance to hostile kingdoms throughout the early historic period, although this may not always have been expressed in conflict, but in another of the actions sometimes performed at royal centres. The *Annals of Inisfallen*, sa 1005 (trans MacAirt 1951:179) records that, "Brian [Borumal] went to Ard Macha and camped in Emain Macha", which may be analogous to the (temporary) occupation of other royal centres by hostile over-kings (cf pp 71-2). The significance of this incident may be that it occurred on Brian's campaign to extend his authority, as (nominal) high-king of Ireland, over the only part of Ireland which lay

outwith his control - the north (on which see Ó Corráin 1972:120-8).

While at Armagh, Brian "... gave twenty ounces of gold to the clergy of Armagh, an action which was not only devout but politic, for the support of Armagh, the primatial church, was extremely valuable" (ibid:124).

That Brian is said to have camped within Navan Fort may suggest that more than purely utilitarian considerations were operating, given that the ecclesiastical settlement of Armagh could perhaps have provided accommodation for such a distinguished visitor. Rather, Brian may have been trying to associate himself with Navan Fort. By occupying the enclosure which an extensive body of literature portrays as the fortified residence of the ancient kings of Ulster (pp 74-5,155), Brian may have been attempting to demonstrate symbolically the legitimacy of his aspirant authority over *Ulaíd* or, indeed, the whole of northern Ireland. Brian's great-grandson, Muirchertach Ua Briain, high-king of Ireland, may have had a similar objective when, in 1103, during one of his attempts to assert his supremacy over northern Ireland, he went to Navan Fort and then gave eight ounces of gold to the Church of Armagh (AU sa 1103, quoted above, p 133; see also ALC sa 1103).

The annalistic entries cited here post-date the period which saw the advent of contemporary historical recording. In addition, several of these entries belong to one of the earliest and most reliable of the annalistic compilations, the *Annals of Ulster*, for which corresponding entries can be traced in other annals. As a result, it seems likely that these entries may be regarded as reliable historical sources (cf pp 39-45). However, as well as these, a number of annals contain allegedly earlier entries which contain references to *Emain Macha*. These sources include the *Annals of Clonmacnoise*, *Cottonian Annals*, *Annals of the Four*



*Masters, Annals of Inisfallen, Annals of Tigernach, and the Annals of Ulster.* The relevant entries range in date from am 3579 (ie 1621 BC) to c AD 580, and a convenient, though not exhaustive, list of them exists (Mallory 1986). The entries consist primarily of the obits of kings, which are given in the form of lengths of reigns. However, the allegedly early dates of these entries, the frequent absence of corresponding entries in other annals, and the duplication of some events suggest that they do not comprise contemporary records but later, retrospective entries. An example of a duplicated entry in the *Annals of Tigernach* occurs c AD 22 (ed Stokes 1895b:408), "*Conchobur mac Nessa in viii. anno Tiberii quieuisse dicitur*" ("It is said that Conchobar died in the eighth year of [the emperorship of] Tiberius") and c AD 34 (ed *ibid*: 410), "*Conchobur mac Nessa obiit, cui sucessit filius eius Causcraid, qui regnavit in Emain annis tribus*" ("Conchobar mac Nessa died and was succeeded by his son Cuscraid, who reigned in *Emain* for three years").

Indeed, the tendency of these sources to record not only obits, but sometimes even the births, of characters who feature prominently in the epic literature suggests that these entries are mythological in character. Conchobar mac Nessa, for example, features in the epic tales of the Ulster Cycle as king of *Ulaid* (pp 74-5, 140, 155). Moreover, some entries are cross-referenced with Classical chronologies, such as the obit of Conchobar (above), and the first Irish event recorded in the

*Annals of Tigernach*, sa 307 BC (ed Stokes 1895b:394):

*In anno .xviii. Ptolomei fuit initiatus regnare in Emain Cimbaed filius Fintain, qui regnavit .xxviii. annis... Omnia monimenta Scottorum usque Cimbaed incerta erant.*

("In the 18th year of the reign of Ptolomy, Cimbaeth mac Fintain began his reign at *Emain* and reigned 28 years... All records of the Irish until Cimbaeth are uncertain")

Such entries clearly demonstrate the hand of the synchronizing historians (MacNeill 1921:25-42; pp 43-5, above) and of the role of the Church in introducing the Hieronymo-Eusebian world chronology. As a result, these entries cannot be accepted as evidence of the royal associations of Navan Fort as early as the mid-second millennium BC. Rather, as constructs of the past, they comprise a mythological history and may reflect the ideological significance of Navan Fort, as a perceived former royal residence, during the early historic period.

In addition to it being the scene of battles and the campsite of high-kings, Navan Fort may also have been the site of an *óenach* or assembly. As discussed in chapter two (pp 72-3), the *óenach* was a periodic, usually annual, assembly of a kingdom's subjects, which was presided over by a king or over-king. *Óenaige* are associated with a range of activities, possibly including the promulgation of (emergency) laws (MacNeill 1935:101-2; Byrne 1973:30-1; p 72, above), the settling of disputes, and, according to the *dindshenchas* on the *óenach Carmain*, the calculation - and therefore possibly collection - of tribute (trans Gwynn 1924:19):

There they would discuss with strife of speech  
the dues and tributes of the province (*cóicid*)...

The same source also states that one of the subjects for recitation in the evening is "the estate of each man as is due,/ so that all may listen to it" (trans *ibid*:21).

However, the social and political significance of the *óenach* may consist of more than simply the business which was conducted there. This is suggested by the primary meaning of *óenach*, "a reunion" (Joynt nd b: col 103). The ideological significance of *óenaige* would appear to be that they represent a "coming together" of the community or people of



the kingdom and a reaffirmation of the social order: "Assemblies... represent both a return to the original unity and the re-creation of order" (Rees and Rees 1961:143; cf *ibid*:168-72). In the case of the *Óenach Carman* at least, Smyth (1982:35) regards the *Óenach* as being central to a sense of social and political identity:

*Óenach Carman* was, above all else, the embodiment of the political integrity and tribal identity of the Leinstermen as an autonomous nation. There, its tribal war-lords sat in ritual assembly presided over by the king of the Province, consciously or unconsciously paying homage to their pagan ancestors and outmoded Celtic gods, while regulating the affairs of their tribes. It was little wonder that *Uí Neill* and *Munster* enemies could not resist the temptation from time to time of trying to preside forcefully over these ancient rites, thereby imposing their overlordship on the Leinstermen.

As Byrne's (1973:30-1; quoted above, p 73) description of the *oenach* conveys, such assemblies may have had a dual character and comprised a combination of formality and of "carnival" at different times. In terms of the formal elements, the *dindshenchas* describes attenders of the *Óenach Tailten* as being "each in due order by rank in his place in the high fair (*ard-Óenaig*)" (trans Gwynn 1913:151). In addition, the *dindshenchas* relates how forty-seven subject kings of the over-king of *Laigin* attended the *Óenach Carmain* (ed and trans Gwynn 1924:12-5; p 140, below). A text in the *Book of Ballymote*, an early fifteenth century compilation of earlier sources, suggests that the seating arrangement around the *rí Laigin* of his principal subject kings reproduced the relative geographical disposition of the subject kingdoms within *Laigin* (O'Curry 1873,2:40; cf Rees and Rees 1961:152; Smyth 1982:35):

It was on the last day that the Leinstermen south of *Gabhar*, [the men of Ossory], held their fair or racing... The seat of their king was on the right hand of the King of *Carman* or Leinster; and the seat of the King of *O'Failghe* [Offaly], on his left...

This is reminiscent of the cosmological ordering of the *coiceda* (pp 103-14) and of the seating arrangement at the Feast of Tara, as described in the Middle Irish mythological tale, *Cath Maigi Raith* (p 106). Like the *coiceda*, the possible seating arrangement of the subject kings of *Laigin*, whether actual or perceived, may have sought to portray those relationships of power within *Laigin* as the product of a natural, unchallengeable, order.

As this brief discussion exemplifies, the study of the form and socio-political significance of *Óenaige* in early historic Ireland is largely dependent upon two accounts, those in the metrical *dindshenchas* concerning the *Óenaige* at *Carman* (ed and trans Gwynn 1924:2-25) and *Tailtiu* (ed and trans Gwynn 1913:146-63). This is as a result of the paucity of other sources. However, the *dindshenchas* does not represent contemporary historical sources, but is Middle Irish and therefore belongs to around the eleventh century (Gwynn 1935:91-114). In addition, the preoccupation of the *dindshenchas* with origins and toponymy, and with heroes, heroines and ancestors who are obviously not of an historical nature, identifies it as mythological in character. The justification behind the use of these sources here is that the *Óenach Tailten*, at least, is a "genuine historical institution" (Binchy 1958a: 115) which is attested in other sources, including the annals, although its traditionally-perceived "national" status has been convincingly disproved (ibid). Although the location of the *Óenach Carmain* is uncertain (p 144) and is not attested by the same breadth or quality of sources as the *Óenach Tailten*, its historical nature is widely accepted (eg MacNeill 1935:102-5; Byrne 1973:163,225). As a result, it is possible that the *dindshenchas* contain an element of reality, especially



in their recording of incidental detail, and describe actual historical practices. This is that *Óenaige* appear to constitute periodic social gatherings at which a formalized spatial mapping of socio-political relationships was manifested, reproducing as microcosm that which occurred within the political unit as a whole. The ideological motive behind this may be that it reinforces relations of power between the participants and, in particular, between the king and his subjects.

The apparent ideological significance of *Óenaige* is emphasized by sources which imply that attendance was compulsory. For example, an interpolation in one of the laws of status, *Míadslechtsa* ("Titles of Dignity"), states that a "... king of the second grade... is entitled to a *cumal* from each subordinate king who fails to attend his house of ale-feasting or his (regular) assembly (*Óenach*) or his (occasional) convention (*dáil*)" (trans MacNeill 1923:55; a *cumal* is a bondwoman, a unit of value [Powell 1980:119-20]). That attendance at an over-king's "house of ale-feasting" and *Óenach* are classed together is interesting because the act of entering a king's house constitutes a symbolic act of submission (Binchy 1970:31; Byrne 1973:124). In a similar manner, attendance at a king's *Óenach* may have symbolized the participant's submission to the authority of the king who presided over it. This is presumably why the *dindshenchas* so laboriously lists the subordinate kings who attended the *Óenach Carmain* (trans Gwynn 1924:12-5): "Sixteen kings... did the host bring in to the mighty fair (*slat-Óenach*). Eight from populous Dothra... Twelve... sprung of the royal seed from great Mastiu. Five from fierce Fid Gaiblí... Six... of the seed of Bresal Brec the smiter...". It is possibly for a similar reason that the mythological *Scéla Conchobair maic Nessa* ("The Tale of Conchobar mac

Nessa") claims that a divine affliction is said to strike absentees from the *Samain* assembly at *Emain Macha* (although this is not actually termed an *Óenach*) (trans Stokes 1910:27):

Now Conchobar himself used to give (?) them the (the feast of) Allhallowtide (*samuín*) because of the assembly (*terchomraic*) of the great host. It was needful to provide for the great multitude, because everyone of the Ulstermen who would not come to Emain in Allhalloweve lost his senses, and on the morrow his barrow (*fert*) and his grave (*lecht*) and his tombstone (*lie*) were placed.

Against this background, it is not surprising that the failure to hold an *Óenach* is treated with disapproval (eg AU sa 872; trans MacAirt and MacNiocaill 1983:331): "The fair of Tailtiu (*Óenach Tailten*) was not held, although there was no just and worthy reason for this - something which we have not known [to happen] from ancient times".

Evidence for an *Óenach* at Navan Fort appears to be sound, though terse, consisting mainly of placenames and hyperbolic references to the event by name only. For example, *Emna Óenach* ("the assembly of *Emain*") is mentioned in an elegy in the *Annals of Ulster*, sa 902 (trans MacAirt and MacNiocaill 1983:353), in which Mael Finnia, king of Brega, is said to have been "... a champion towering over the assembly of Emain (*Emna Óenuch*)...". The placename *Aenach Macha* appears in the annals on three occasions (AFM am 3579; AU sa 1021; 1103; the latter is quoted above, p 133), each in connection with a battle or attack. The *Annals of Ulster*, sa 1021, record a battle, during the course of a cattle raid, on the assembly site itself (trans MacAirt and MacNiocaill 1983:457):

Aed ua Néill's son brought a raiding party over the Uí Dorthain who were in Mag Itechta, and they slew in Lethderg in the pursuit. And the best part of the Airgialla caught up with him from behind and came in front of him, or (as is stated in the Book of Dub dá Leithe) the Uí Méith and the Mugdorna and the Saithe and the men of Fernmag and the Uí Dorthain with their kings overtook him. Ua Ceillechain and ua Lorcain with the Uí Bresail and the Uí Nialláin, moreover, were waiting for him in Aenach Macha and they all surrounded him; and Aed's son took his spoils past them all, though he had only twelve score warriors. And a good number on both



sides fell in the middle of Aenach Macha or Ard Macha. Thus in the book of Dub dá Leithe.

The entry under am 3579 (ie 1621 BC), is one of the mythological entries which lie at the beginning of the *Annals of the Four Masters* (on which see pp 39-40, 135-6) (trans O'Donovan 1856, 1:39):

Conmael, son of Emer, having been thirty years in the sovereignty of Ireland, fell, in the battle of Aenach Macha, by Tigernmus, son of Follach.

Although a mythological entry, this entry may reflect the perceived significance of the assembly site at a later date (possibly much later, as the *Annals of the Four Masters* is a seventeenth century compilation [p 38]). Of particular interest is that Keating (1, §25; trans Dinneen 1908:121) states that Conmael "... was buried on the south side of Aonach Macha in the place which is called Conmhaol's Mound (*Feart Conmhaoil*) at this day". *Feart* actually means "A mound or tumulus: glossed] *tumulum*... Esp[ecially] a mound over a burial-place, often of a great size, hence common in place-names..." (Joynt and Knott 1950: col 93; see further Reeves 1860:47-9; Binchy 1955:83; Thomas 1971: 66-7; Brown and Harper 1985:159, n 3; Lynn forthcoming b). Its use here may suggest that it related to a funerary mound.

*Feart Conmhaoil* is usually identified (eg Dinneen 1914:296) with the Vicar's Carn in Drumconwell townland, 6 km south-south-east of Armagh (IGR H 914398). However, a more likely identification is apparent. This concerns two funerary monuments which were formerly located in an area of slightly raised ground in Ballybrolly townland, about 800 m north of Navan Fort (Graves 1884:409; Lett 1884:431-2; 1911: 297; Bassett 1888:31). Sheet twelve of the 1860 (second) edition of the Ordnance Survey six inch map records "site of Carn" at two locations

(IGR H 845462 and H 846461). The more northerly site is described by

Lett (1912) as comprising:

... thirty undressed blocks of the local limestone, arranged in more or less of a circle 70 feet in diameter... It is evident that only one-half of the stones marking the original ring now remains.

Various opinions have been offered whether we have here the remains of a cairn or a circle. I am inclined to regard it as the former, because such of the stones as are set on their ends are quite close to one another, and because the longer stones are laid longitudinally on the line of the arc of the circle.

Paterson's (1940) claim that "A dolmen-grave formerly occupied the centre" appears to be uncorroborated. According to the same account, the "Site of [a] similar cairn is still traceable", although Lett, writing in 1912 (p 33), reports a source as having said that "It was removed about fifty years ago...". Lett (1884:431) states that this second cairn was similar in size to the first. These sites lay near a group of cottages which are named on the map of 1860 as "Conway's Grave", which is apparently an Anglicization of *Feart Conmhaoil*, suggesting that this is the site to which Keating is referring. Warner (1986:7) lists both sites as examples of a "Passage Tomb?", stating that each is "Probably the remains of a Neolithic tomb (about 3500 - 2500 BC)", although this interpretation may rest heavily on Paterson's account.

This evidence suggests a possible link between two sites which are no longer extant, but appear to have been funerary monuments, and Keating's seventeenth century interpolation of the relevant entry in the *Annals of the Four Masters*. This link, therefore, is rather tenuous and, accordingly, must be treated with care. However, the possible relationship of the "south side of Aonach Macha" with a burial mound does conform to a pattern which is evident from other assembly sites. This is the common association of assembly sites with funerary monuments and/or myths concerning the status of assembly sites as ancient burial grounds



(Westropp 1919:9-10). Ettlinger (1954:30) claims that there are "22 places in Ireland where popular assemblies, fairs and races are associated with ancient burials". For example, the *dindshenchas* on the

*Óenach Carmain* (trans Gwynn 1924:3) states that:

A burial ground of kings is its noble cemetery,  
even specially dear to hosts of high rank;  
under the mounds of assembly (*dumaib dála*) are many  
of its host of a stock ever-honoured.

*Duma* specifically denotes a burial mound (Byrne and Joynt 1960: col 448). MacNeill (1935:103) states that "The place of assembly in this as in other instances, probably at one time in all instances, was the precinct of an ancient heathen cemetery". This has led to the identification of the *Óenach Carmain* with the Curragh, Co Kildare (IGR N 7811) (Orpen 1906; Binchy 1958a:125), a concentration of enclosures and funerary monuments some 5 km north-west of the royal centre of Knockaulin (Ó Ríordáin 1951; Evans 1966:136-7. Note, however, that O'Donovan [1856,1:461, n h], Westropp [1919:6-7, n 4] and MacNeill [1962,1:339-40] favour alternative locations).

So common is the association of assembly sites with funerary monuments and, in mythological sources, the origins of an *óenach* with its founder's funeral, that Rees and Rees (1961:169) state that:

The festival was a return to the beginning of things. In the first place it was a commemoration and re-enactment of the mythological event in which the sanctity of the site had its origin. It was a wake for the dead founder, and the races and other competitions were her funeral games.

Such an association may be ascribed an ideological significance. For example, Conmael is stated by the *Annals of the Four Masters* to have been "in the sovereignty of Ireland" (quoted on p 141-2). The portrayal of a funerary monument, which is located on or near an assembly site, as the burial place of a past king may be inspired by the desire of a later

king to demonstrate the royal status and antiquity of the *óenach*. In addition, the association of funerary monuments and assembly sites may have been intended to make explicit the genealogical ties between the (alleged) occupant of the tomb and his (alleged) successor, the present king who now presides over the *óenach*. In this way, the legitimacy of both the *óenach* and the king associated with it is promoted by conveying the immemorial and mystical aura of both the assembly and the kingship.

This is the essence of the significance of those pasts which were constructed around monuments. They represent an appropriation of meaning in the form of a rationalizing of the physical world in terms of the then dominant political authority. The apparently deliberate association of assembly sites with ancient burial mounds emphasizes the significance of the *óenach* as a medium through which the existing social order and relations of power are perpetuated (cf pp 137-41). An analogy may be made here with the use of prehistoric funerary monuments as royal inauguration places during the Medieval period, such as Carnfree, Co

Roscommon (AConn sa 1310; trans Freeman 1944:223):

Maelruanaid mac Diarmata... carried him [Fedlimid mac Aeda] to Carn *Fraích* and installed him on the mound (carn) according to the practice of the saints...

That earlier funerary monuments also played an important role in rituals of royalty during the early historic period is implied by their presence at some of the royal centres, Rathcroghan and Tara in particular (pp 82-5, 95), and by their association with some fortified royal residences of the early historic period, such as Clogher (Warner 1988a:56-8). Indeed, one royal residence, that of the *Síl nÁedo Sláine* kings of north Brega, was not merely associated with a prehistoric funerary monument, but was



actually built on the Neolithic passage tomb of Knowth, Co Meath (Byrne 1968; Eogan 1977; forthcoming; Bradley 1987b:10-4).

*Macha* appears to have been the name which was applied to the area around Navan Fort (*Emain Macha*) and Armagh (*Ard Macha*) in general (Arthurs 1953; pp 187-9, below). This does not help to provide a close identification for the site of the *Óenach Macha*. However, according to Keating, *Feart Conmhaoil* was located "... on the south side of Aonach Macha..." (p 142). If this is identified with the probable funerary monument which formerly existed at Conway's Grave, Ballybrolly townland, this may suggest that the assembly site lay a short distance to the north of Navan Fort. However, other evidence appears to contradict this. References to *Eamain Óenaigh* ("Emain of the Assemblies") (AFM sa 898) and to *Óenach Emna* in the *dindshenchas* (ed Gwynn 1913:20) may attest the association of the assembly with *Emain Macha* itself. This could even suggest that the assembly was held within the enclosure of Navan Fort, unless the assembly was named simply from its spatial proximity to Navan Fort (below). Moreover, the townland name of Enagh, 2.5 km south of Navan Fort (IGR H 847424), is derived from *Óenach* (Arthurs 1957:28, no 38), leading Hughes (1955:4) to propose that "The Aonach or Fair of Emania may have been held on the low rounded hill of the present townland of Enagh ...". However, the association of this with the *Óenach Macha/Óenach Emna*, if any, is obscure and it is possible that this relates to a different assembly.

Rather than attempting to determine a precise site for this assembly, it may be more realistic to locate it within the environs of Navan Fort in general, with, perhaps, the monument as its focus. Hennessy (1887:548,n 1), for example, claims that the "Fair-green of

Macha" comprised the plain immediately surrounding, and including, Navan Fort, although he gives no impression of the area which he has in mind. In some respects the precise location of the *Óenach Macha* does not matter (but see p 140 on the possible symbolic significance of attendance at an *Óenach* within the earthworks of a royal centre). This is because the sources relating to this *Óenach* which are cited above confirm the importance of Navan Fort as a point of reference within the landscape and with which the assembly is associated. Indeed, it is possible that the entire locality of Navan Fort may have been occupied by the *Óenach*, for which a possible analogy is recorded in the *Annals of the Four Masters*, sa 1168 (trans O'Donovan 1856, 2:1169):

On this occasion the fair of Tailtin was celebrated by the king of Ireland and the people of Leath Cuinn, and their horses and chariots (?) were spread out on the space extending from *Mullach Aiti* to *Mullach Tailten*.

The two places mentioned, the Hill of Lloyd, at Kells, and Teltown, are 10.5 km (6.5 miles) apart. While this entry may incorporate an element of hyperbole and also concerns an atypical *Óenach* - the last of the "traditional" *Óenaige*, held shortly after the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland (Binchy 1958a:126) - nevertheless it gives an impression of the area over which an *Óenach*, or at least the modes of transport of its participants, could be spread.

One issue which must be addressed here is that of the status of the *Óenach Emna*, whether it is historical or mythological in character (cf p 73). Although it is recorded in several historical sources, such as the annals, these appear to refer to the *Óenach* as a placename and relate to the assembly site rather than the actual assembly itself. Those sources which do mention the assembly appear to be mythological. These include a number of episodes of the Ulster Cycle (cited in Mallory 1987b:15), such



as *Longes mac nUislenn* ("The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu") (ed and trans Hull 1949:51,69; trans Gantz 1981:267), which mentions the "*Óenach macha*" and, more explicitly, the early Middle Irish tale *Scéla Conchobair maic Nessa* (ed and trans Stokes 1910:26-7; quoted on pp 140-1, above). In a similar vein, *Fled Bricrend* (ed and trans Henderson 1899:4-5) mentions the "... *Óenach la hUitu i n-Emain Macha*" ("assembly of the *Ulaid* in *Emain Macha*").

In addition, suspicions about the historical character of the *Óenach Emna* may be increased by a reference to a *Feis Eamna* in the Middle Irish mythological tale, *Cath Muige Rath* (ed and trans Marstrander 1911a:232-3). On analogy with the better-known *Feis Temro*, *feseanna* are thought to be royal inauguration rituals which involved the symbolic mating of king and land (Carney 1955:334-9; Binchy 1958a:127-38). This appears to be the only reference to the *Feis Eamna*, and, because it is contained within a late and mythological source, it seems likely that this represents a construct of the past. This may be modelled on the fame of the *Feis Temro* and perhaps represents an attempt to portray Navan Fort as a site of immemorial sanctity and royal authority, akin to Tara, through its association with a *feis*. However, it is equally possible that this is separate from the *Óenach Macha* and is irrelevant to the historicity of the *Óenach Macha*.

Although the evidence for the form of an *Óenach* at Navan Fort is slight, the range of evidence - historical, mythical and toponymic - parallels that for better known and unequivocally historical *oenaige*. In the cases of *Óenach Tailten* and *Óenach Carmain*, for example, historical sources such as the annals mention the assemblies but say very little about them. As noted above (p 139) it is mythological sources such as

the *dindshechas* that one is dependent upon for an account of the assemblies. Part of the reason for this may be that these mythological accounts had an ideological function, that they sought to portray these assemblies as means of legitimizing the existing social order and of reinforcing relations of power (p 138). Although one cannot draw unequivocal conclusions, the *Óenach Emna/Óenach Macha* appears to be historical rather than mythological in character.

In order to seek possible corroboration of the ideological significance of Navan Fort and its association with royal activities during the early historic period, the archaeological record may be considered. As noted above (pp 87-8), however, excavation yielded no evidence of occupation at Navan Fort of later than Iron Age date. Moreover, Wailes (1982:8) states that "... assemblies and inaugurations might well leave no trace archaeologically". However, while Navan Fort itself has produced no evidence of early historic activity, its environs have.

The immediate vicinity of Navan Fort appears to have yielded a small but impressive assemblage of artefacts belonging to the early historic period. These are mostly surface finds made during the mid-nineteenth century and their exact provenances are unknown. The artefacts include four bronze penannular brooches with zoomorphic design (Paterson and Davies 1940a:71-2; Weatherup 1978:39; Kilbride-Jones 1980:93-4, no 26, 119, 122, no 88, 135-6, no 129; Warner 1986:8). Two of these (AM 38-39 and AM 39-39) are recorded as having been found "near Navan Fort" (Weatherup 1978:39). The British Museum register of accessions states that a third brooch (BM 1862,6-17,6) was found "Near Navan Rath, Co. Armagh" and the fourth (BM 1868,7-9,19) in a "Field [on the] East



side of Navan Rath". This latter brooch formerly belonged to the Brackstone collection and the manuscript sale catalogue of c 1865 has the entry under item 503, "Brooch - a very fine specimen found March or April 1852 in ploughing a field on the east side of the Navan Rath near Armagh" (Youngs in lit, 26.9.89). In addition, a bronze pin with a decorated head (BM 1862,6,17,10), also of early historic date, is recorded as having been found "near Navan" (Warner 1986:8).

The other artefacts which are of interest here are two sherds of pottery which were "Found just outside site 1 [ie Navan Fort] on the north-east" (Warner 1986:8), "... in disturbed ground between the bank of Navan and the quarry..." (Warner in lit, 22.5.89). These sherds are "... probably from an Early Christian amphora imported from the Mediterranean..." (Warner 1986:8; though note that Warner later [1986:9] describes the sherds as "possible Mediterranean pottery"). However, Warner (in lit, 22.5.89) states that these sherds "... are simply too small to be able to be certain that they are from B amphorae, but they are most certainly not the distinctive B1 or B11" (on which see pp 153-4). Thomas (1981:9-16) proposes a total of six subdivisions of class B pottery, but also includes a "B misc(ellaneous)" category (ibid:17):  
This category was first put forward to cover frs, from their nature, shape, context and stratigraphy to be associated with B1/B11 rather than with any R-B coarse wares (or medieval)....  
Within this class probably lurk plain sherds of B1, the fabric and surface variations of which are only now being recognised; almost certainly large amphoras from the eastern Mediterranean.

In Ireland, sherds of class B (misc) amphorae have been found at Clogher, Co Tyrone, and Dalkey Island, Co Dublin (ibid:18; p 154, below). As probable sherds of Mediterranean amphorae, but not one of the more distinctive types, the sherds from outside Navan Fort may belong to class B (misc).

An obvious problem here is just how close to Navan Fort is "near Navan Fort". It is always possible that these artefacts were found some distance away but were said to have been discovered "near Navan Fort" simply because it is one of the most obvious landmarks in the locality. Alternatively, a Navan Fort provenance may have been fabricated with the intention of increasing the sale price of artefacts to antiquarians by associating them with a famous site. In support of the discovery of these artefacts within the vicinity of Navan Fort, however, is the more detailed provenance of one brooch (BM 1868,7-9,19; p 149, above). In addition, a range of other artefacts (Warner 1986:7-8), mostly later prehistoric metalwork, is said to have been found near or within Navan Fort at around the same period. Some of these artefacts have more detailed provenances, such as the Iron Age bronze conical spearbutt (NMI 1906:162), which was "Found in a field adjoining Navan Rath, along with no 1, 1834" (Warner 1986:7). The apparent discovery of many of these artefacts between the 1830s and the 1850s is suggestive, perhaps, of a period of increased agricultural activity which appears to have disturbed and brought to light a range of artefacts within close proximity of Navan Fort. The provenances of these artefacts, therefore, are assumed to be genuine.

The importance of these artefacts is that they are all highly diagnostic, both chronologically and socially. The brooches date to the sixth or seventh centuries AD (Warner 1986:8-9) and their possession may be an indicator of social rank. For example, the early eighth century law of status, *Críth Gablach* (IV 322.107; trans MacNeill 1923:297) lists "a precious brooch of an ounce" (ie worth an ounce of silver) as one of the possessions of the *aire déssu* rank of noble. Although the *aire déssu*



is the lowest of the five ranks of noble described in *Críth Gablach*, this source - even if it does give an idealized impression of the social hierarchy - is important because it makes an explicit association between the wearing of a brooch and a specific, and elevated, rank. This association may also be attested in other media, for example, the eighth or ninth century sculpture of a king (or possibly a warrior) at White Island, Co Fermanagh, on which a penannular brooch with expanded terminals is clearly depicted as being worn on the left shoulder (Byrne 1973: frontis; Ó Floinn 1989:72,89). Some brooches, such as the late ninth/early tenth century penannular brooch from Ballyspellan, Co Kilkenny (Ryan 1989c), also bear inscriptions. This may have had the effect of emphasizing their significance as symbols of high status, as a result of the restricted knowledge of literacy. Even if such inscriptions were not visible while the brooch was being worn - as they are usually on the reverse of brooches - they could still be known and impress by reputation. This blurs further the (artificial) distinction between artefact and document (pp 21-2).

In addition, evidence for the production of penannular brooches has been found during the course of excavation of two royal sites. This evidence consists primarily of clay mould fragments and unfinished products. These have been found, for example, at the royal site of Clogher, Co Tyrone (Warner 1979a:37; Warner, in Craddock 1989: pp 186-7, nos 172-3, p 195, no 188, p 198, no 193, pp 209-10, nos 220-1. See Craddock 1989 for a range of such items from a number of sites). Of this evidence, Warner (1988a:66) states, "... the variety of industrial practices found at Clogher (iron, bronze, gold and glass...) would only be expected at a royal site... or at one of the monastic centres".

Penannular brooches which were probably produced at Clogher have been traced widely (Kilbride-Jones 1980:63-7). Similar evidence has also come from *Dál Riata*, a kingdom of Irish origin founded in western Scotland, where the hill-fort of Dunadd, mid-Argyll, appears to have been a centre of penannular brooch production (Lane 1980:11; 1981:6, pls 1 and 2; Nieke unpub; Nieke and Duncan 1988:13-4,17). Of this, Nieke and Duncan (1988:14) claim that:

... the concentration on the manufacture of a variety of styles of penannular brooch may hint at the particular importance of this form of decorative jewellery. Indeed it is possible that these brooches were used to display social position and in particular close links with the royal lineage of the kingdom. Possession of them would have been unlikely to confer social status in and of themselves, instead their display was a means of symbolising relationships which were already clearly established by other means, mainly kinship links and patterns of clientage.

If the identification of the sherds from just outside Navan Fort as fragments of Mediterranean pottery is confirmed, then these artefacts may be equally distinctive. Although the sherds do not belong to any of the recognized sub-classes of class B imported pottery, it may be noted that this class comprises amphorae, large storage vessels of Mediterranean origin which are believed to have been used for the transportation of wine or oil. Their importation may be dated to between the late fifth and seventh centuries (Alcock 1971:202-4; Thomas 1981:9-16). As well as belonging to a narrowly-defined period, the distribution of class B pottery in Britain and Ireland is also geographically and socially restricted. It is confined to western Britain and Ireland, where it usually occurs on defended or fortified sites on or near the coast (Thomas 1959; 1981; Alcock 1971:206-29; 1988:24-5). Several of these sites have historically-documented royal associations. In Ireland, for example, of the six sites to produce fragments of class B pottery,



two, Garranes, Co Cork (Ó Ríordáin 1942:127-9; Thomas 1981:11,13) and Clogher, Co Tyrone (Warner 1973:10; 1979a:37; Thomas 1981:11,13,18) have probable and known royal associations respectively (Warner 1988a:63): Both excavated royal sites whose date goes back to the sixth century have produced sherds belonging to amphorae imported from the Mediterranean area ('B' ware), and wine would have been the content of at least some of these... The indication these give of high status is undeniable, and no small, non-residential sites have produced them; but they have occurred at monastic sites and at two large coastal promontory forts..."

Indeed, class B pottery has been found on a higher proportion of ecclesiastical sites in Ireland than in Britain. These include Reask, Co Kerry (Fanning 1981:114-5; Thomas 1981:13), Inishcaltra, Co Clare (Thomas 1981:13) and Derrynaflan, Co Tipperary (Youngs et al 1986:187, no 201). In addition, a sixth site, of indeterminate nature, on Dalkey Island, Co Dublin, has also yielded class B (misc) pottery (Liversage 1968:166-7; Thomas 1981:18).

This evidence may suggest that the control of overseas trade, or at least of imported goods, was divided between secular and ecclesiastical concerns. The inland location of Navan Fort - 40 km north-north-east of the head of Carlingford Lough - may emphasize further the power of those individuals or institutions who claimed association with Navan Fort, although it may be noted that Clogher is further inland. This is a reflection of their apparent ability to command links with a trade which appears to have been largely coastal. Indeed, Doherty (1980:80) suggests that the community of Armagh had its own port, possibly on Carlingford Lough, through which it conducted maritime trade.

Although the social context - ecclesiastical or secular - of the possible importation of amphorae to Navan Fort is unclear, these sherds may attest the presence of activity at, and the association of powerful

elites - secular and/or ecclesiastical - with Navan Fort between around the mid-fifth and mid-sixth centuries. This activity, and possibly its secular nature, may be supported by the penannular brooches (Warner 1986:9):

... the four Early Christian penannular brooches... are a remarkable number of this type of object for a single site. There is historical evidence that Emain continued to be a place of importance for the Ulster kings after it had ceased to be a royal habitation or centre of pagan ritual. These brooches, and the possible Mediterranean pottery... confirm this evidence.

It is worth noting that a ninth century annular brooch (BM 1893,6-18,29) is known from Tara (Smith 1914:239,248; Youngs 1989:97-8, no 77), and this may support the association of elaborate secular metalwork with monuments of continued royal significance. (This brooch is not to be confused with the "Brooch of Tara", which was actually found at Bettystown, Co Meath).

The political context of Navan Fort's significance during the early historic period and whether, as Warner claims, it was associated with the kings of Ulster will now be assessed. In order to do this, however, it is necessary firstly to consider an influential and complex body of literature.

#### Monument and Mythology: Navan Fort and the Ulster Cycle

One body of literature has been most influential in the study not only of the socio-political context of Navan Fort, but also of early Irish society and that of the wider Celtic world. This literature is the tales of the Ulster Cycle. Although this, and the other cycles of Irish epic literature, are a product of Medieval processes of redaction and compilation, the episodes of the Ulster Cycle are united in their common setting, themes and characters. They are set in *Ulaíd* (Ulster), during



the reign of Conchobar mac Nessa, king of *Ulaíd*, and concern the exploits of the champions of the *Cráeb Rúad* ("Red Branch", a royal hall, descriptions of which are quoted and assessed on pp 74-6) and Cúchulainn, the hero of *Ulaíd*, in particular. However, the central, heroic, character may embody the aspirations or fate of his people, while the themes of this literature appear to be concepts such as the role of the individual within society (as exemplified by the hero), honour, valour and mortality. In its themes and in its treatment of fantastic characters and feats, these sources give every impression of being mythological in nature that is, concerned with the exposition of social truths and origins rather than the narration of facts which have a basis in historical reality (pp 23-4,32). In this respect, the early Irish epic literature may be regarded as belonging to an international genre of mythology which is common to many non-industrial societies.

That the episodes of the Ulster Cycle are mythological in nature is stated forcefully by O'Rahilly (1946:271):

... the Ulidian tales are wholly mythical in origin, and they have not the faintest connexion with anything that could be called history, apart from the fact that traditions of warfare between the *Ulaíd* and the *Connachta* have been adventitiously introduced into a few of them, and especially into the longest and best known tale, '*Táin Bó Cualnge*'. Cúchulainn, who in the *Táin* is assigned the role of defender of the *Ulaíd* against their invaders, can be shown to be in origin Lug or Lugaid, a deity whom we may conveniently call the Hero, provided we bear in mind that he was a wholly supernatural personage, and not a mere mortal. The other leading characters, such as Cú Roí, Fergus, Bricriu and Medb, are likewise euhemerized deities.

Such an interpretation is widely, though not universally, accepted.

Carney (1983:116) is notable as a recent dissenter:

... there is a strong historical element in the *Táin*, but... a number of the stories surrounding it are composed fictions. These fictions were, of course, composed partly from traditional thinking and material, and set against what I would regard as the fundamentally historical background of the central epic. *Táin Bó Cualnge* is, I would hold, neither fiction nor history, but an amalgam of both. It could best be regarded as possessing the truth

of a historical novel, a novel written many centuries after the events it portrays, but adhering more or less closely to a skeletal history of the past.

This interpretation effectively classes this literature as legendary, as having a *basis* in historical reality, regardless of the extent to which the events portrayed are embellished in later versions. Carney (1983: 128), however, undermines his own argument by claiming a direct borrowing from Greek mythological epic poetry, "... the resemblances between the *Iliad* and the *Táin* are, in some cases, so close that we must assume in seventh- or eighth-century Ireland either a direct or an excellent indirect knowledge of the Greek epic".

Archaeologists and historians have tended not to be concerned with either the symbolism of these tales or the (admittedly complex) issues surrounding their structure, composition and transmission. Rather, the appeal of this literature is that it ostensibly portrays a pagan and bellicose society, in which the *cóiced* of *Ulaíd* is engaged in pandemic warfare with other *cóiceda*, especially *Connacht*. This is a society in which heroes drive chariots, feast and fight over the right to the champion's portion, engage in single combat and decapitate their vanquished enemies, and swear by "the gods". Several scenes are set in or around *Emain Macha*, which is portrayed as the fortified court of Conchobar (pp 74-5). It is in this literature that the enduring myth that Navan Fort was the royal capital of *Ulaíd* (eg DoENI 1983:80, no 28; Raftery 1984:316; Mallory nd a) originates.

The events related in this literature were traditionally dated, by the synchronizing historians of the early historic period, to around the time of Christ (MacNeill 1921:18,25-42). For instance, the birth of Conchobar, king of *Ulaíd*, is said to have been simultaneous with



Christ's nativity (*Compert Conchobair*; ed and trans Meyer 1885:176,180; *Scéla Conchobair maic Nessa* S4; ed and trans Stokes 1910:22-3) while Conchobair dies on hearing of Christ's crucifixion (*Aided Conchobair*; ed and trans Meyer 1906b: infra). This is an example of attempts to integrate the Irish mythological past with classical and Biblical chronologies (on which see pp 33,136). In addition, the *Annals of Tigernach*, sa c AD 12, records the event which is the subject of the central epic of the Ulster Cycle, "*Slógad Tána bó Cualngí*" (ed Stokes 1895b:406). This epic tale is *Táin bó Cuailnge* ("The Cattle Raid of Cooley") (trans Kinsella 1969; ed and trans O'Rahilly 1976). The retrospective nature of these sources, which allegedly predate the advent of contemporary historical recording in the annals (on which see pp 39-45), has not fooled the majority of historians (eg Byrne 1973: 50):, "There is no definite evidence against the medieval Irish belief that Conchobar and his court flourished around the time of Christ, but such synchronisms are the work of learned monks: the genuine saga tradition knows nothing of chronology".

However, an influential and lucidly-argued case seeks to demonstrate that the composition of this epic literature does belong to the Iron Age (Jackson 1964). Jackson uses the evidence of the type of society, material culture and religious beliefs which are portrayed in the tales of the Ulster Cycle to argue that they were composed during the Iron Age. In particular, Jackson (1964:5-6,48-52), mirroring Ridgeway's (1906) much earlier study, identifies the material culture depicted in the tales with that of the Irish Iron Age, especially artefacts in the distinctive "La Tène" artistic style. Jackson (1964:28-43) also cites parallels between the social practices portrayed in the

epic literature and Classical authors' accounts of those of the continental Celts. These parallels, he claims, corroborate the Iron Age origin of the epic literature. Further evidence of the tales' Iron Age composition is allegedly supplied by the political setting of the tales - a powerful and extensive *Ulaíd* within a five-fold division of Ireland, a political geography which was not in existence during the early historic period (ibid:46-8; cf pp 62-4, above).

An Iron Age origin for this literature necessitates its oral composition, as literacy was only introduced to Ireland with the conversion to Christianity (pp 2,6-7). The preservation of these tales, Jackson claims, results from their oral transmission until they were committed to writing sometime after the conversion. Jackson's (1964) study is subtitled *A Window on the Iron Age*, and this characterizes the manner in which the tales of the Ulster Cycle have been employed by some archaeologists. The attractions of using these sources with which to study Irish Iron Age society are manifest. They ostensibly depict a pagan and prehistoric society which, in ordinary circumstances, could only be studied through the archaeological record. The tales of the Ulster Cycle, therefore, are presented as a convenient source from which an understanding of the nature of Irish Iron Age society can be readily gained and to an extent which the archaeological record alone could never rival. For example, these sources seemingly provide an interpretation of Navan Fort as the fortified residence of the king of Ulster and base of its heroes.

However, it appears that not only has Jackson's interpretation of the social and historical context of this literature been abused, but that Jackson's interpretation itself is flawed. For example, Piggott



(1965:226; emphases mine) states that "Our sources for a study of the last phase of *prehistoric Celtic Europe* are threefold: archaeology, the comments of Greek and Roman writers, and the oral vernacular tradition that survived in Ireland long enough to become incorporated in written documents in the middle ages, and which in part relates to a pre-Christian, *prehistoric order of Celtic society*". In this manner, the society which is allegedly portrayed in the epic literature is viewed as comprising or exemplifying a set of social values which are observed by an idealized and universal "Celtic society". This ignores the specific geographical and historical contexts of this literature.

Three aspects of the epic literature appear to contradict Jackson's conclusions regarding its oral composition and transmission during the Iron Age and its portrayal of the society in which it was composed. These are structure, contents and character. The literary dimension of this case is made in greater detail elsewhere (Aitchison 1987:88-99). Jackson's (1964) analysis of the episodes of the Ulster Cycle emphasize content and transmission at the expense of structure and social context. However, structure is central to the interpretation of the epic literature. The tales are in prose rather than verse. This is perhaps surprising, because if they were orally-composed and transmitted, one might expect them to exhibit a range of prosodic features, such as formulaic composition, repetition, parallelism, alliteration, assonance, rhyme, rhythm and metre (on which see Finnegan 1977:93-109). These assist composition in performance and memorization and are more likely to be found in verse than prose works.

However, the presence of prosodic systems is not necessarily indicative of oral composition and transmission. This is demonstrated by

the Anglo-Saxon epic poem, *Beowulf*, which displays internal alliteration and a stress-based metre, and yet is now widely accepted as a literary composition (Campbell 1971:283,287-8,291-2; Wormald 1978:38,44,48-58; Dumville 1981:146). However, verse may be more likely to have been orally-composed and transmitted if it exhibits several prosodic systems. In this context, it may be noted that the range of prosodic devices which is evident in the poetry of Homer and in the oral poetry of many different societies has not been demonstrated to exist within early Irish epic literature, although some attempts have been made (Ross 1959; O'Nolan 1968; 1969). For instance, a number of tales of the Ulster Cycle are known to have been included in the manuscript collection, *Cín Droma Snechta*, which dates to the first half of the eighth century (Thurneysen 1921:16-7; MacCana 1972:102). Although this no longer survives, its contents are known and are preserved in later sources. Of one of its tales, *Compert Con Culainn* ("The Birth of Cúchulainn"), MacCana (1972: 109) states that "... the narrative is concise to the point of abruptness and lacks those stylistic features which are most typical of traditional oral narration: alliteration, repetition, description and dialogue".

Some epic tales, however, contain verse passages, known as *rosc* (pl *roscada*). These are of interest because they display a range of prosodic devices and their language and syntax are often more archaic than that of the prose body of the tales (MacCana 1966:72-6). MacCana (1966:77-88) identifies some of the *roscada* as magical and prophetic utterances. Whilst some or all of these may represent orally-composed and transmitted passages which have been incorporated in literary prose epics at a later date, as in the case of some Medieval Icelandic sagas, there is



no conclusive evidence. Indeed, it is equally possible that they represent literary devices. For instance, they are in the first person and serve to heighten mood (Dillon 1947:253) and their archaic properties may fulfill a similar function. In addition, these archaisms may represent specialized linguistic forms rather than earlier passages of verse (cf Dumville 1981:121-37). Through their usage, poets may have been seeking to impress their audience and to safeguard their poetic knowledge by reciting it in archaic form (MacCana 1970:72; Finnegan 1977:111). In support of this, it is now believed that similar verse passages within some law tracts, which were previously thought to be transcriptions of an orally-composed and transmitted legal corpus, actually represent literary compositions (Breatnach 1984).

Indeed, much of Jackson's case for the oral composition and transmission of the episodes of the Ulster Cycle relies on assumption and analogy. In particular, Jackson (1964:25,39) cites the analogy of the Gallic druids and post-Medieval Irish bards for the oral composition and transmission of epic literature in Iron Age Ireland. However, the sources which Jackson cites make it clear that both druids and bards were literate and that both oral and literary modes of composition existed in relation to each other, an inappropriate analogy for a completely non-literate society (Aitchison 1987:94-7). In addition, Jackson does not define "oral composition" or "oral literature" and is vague about the processes through which, according to his interpretation, the epic literature must have been orally transmitted for at least 350 years before being committed to writing. Moreover, analogy with genuine non-literate societies indicates that orally-transmitted material is transformed, to varying extents, in the process of

recitation, according to the context of the recital and the composition of the audience (Goody and Watt 1963:31-4). Given this, it cannot be assumed that even the literary redactions of orally-transmitted tales bear a direct relationship to the original oral compositions.

Jackson's conclusion that the contents of the epic literature demonstrate the Iron Age composition and transmission of these tales may also be contradicted. For instance, Jackson places particular emphasis on one item of material culture and a number of social practices which occur in the epic literature. The prominence of the war chariot within the Ulster Cycle indicates, according to Jackson (1964:17-8,33-5,40-1), the continental origins of the Irish Celts and the Iron Age date of composition of the epic literature. These conclusions rest solely on analogy with Classical writers' observations of the use of the war chariot amongst the Celts in different parts of Europe between the Battle of Sentinum in 295 BC (Livy 10:28) and the early third century AD (Cassius Dio 76:12). However, there is no evidence for the use of the chariot in Ireland during this period (Jope 1955:37; cf Piggott 1983: 235-8):

Virtually no undoubted examples of the more important parts of these chariots have so far been recorded from Ireland, such as are well known from Britain, NE France, or S Germany. We have no wheels or their iron tyres... no lynch-pins, and no horn-caps. Of terrets (rein guiding-rings on the yoke) there is but one poor example from Co Antrim, perhaps anyway an import... from Scotland.

Not only that, but chariots are depicted on high crosses, such as the Cross of the Scriptures at Clonmacnoise, Co Offaly, erected c 900 (Henry 1964: pl 64), and occur in a wide variety of literary sources. For example, the founder of the southern *Uí Néill* dynasty of *Clann Cholmáin* is recorded as having been killed in his chariot by a member of the *Cruthin* (one of the principal *Ulaíd* kingdoms) (CS sa 558; trans



Hennessey 1866b:53), "Murder of Colman Mor, son of Diarmaid, in his chariot (*curru*), by Dubhsloit Ua Trena". In addition, Adomnán, hagiographer of Colum Cille, in his account of the battle of *Ondemmone* (Ir *Ond-mone*, ie *Nóin Dairí Lothair*) in 562 or 563, recounts that "... the saint prophesied of a king of the Cruithni, who was called Echoid Laib, how he was defeated, and escaped, sitting in a chariot (*curruí*)" (*Vita Columbae* S18a; ed and trans Anderson and Anderson 1961:26-7). Although the latter, and possibly the former, are not exactly contemporary historical sources, there is no reason to doubt their accuracy and they appear to attest the use of the war chariot in early historic Ireland (pace Byrne 1973:49). Other sources, historical, literary and sculptural, record the use of chariots throughout the early historic period, though not necessarily in battle (eg AU sa 810, 1020; quoted on pp 195 and 262 respectively ).

Concentrating on the portrayal of another item of material culture in the episodes of the Ulster Cycle, the sword, Mallory (nd b) concludes that the type of sword described is more consistent with that in use during the period of Norse settlement in Ireland, the ninth and tenth centuries. It is possible, however, that this attests the up-dating of minor details within the epic literature during transmission, rather than having any bearing on the date of composition (Aitchison 1987:93).

Jackson also emphasizes the cultural and chronological implications of decapitation and the taking of heads as trophies. This is widely attested amongst the Iron Age Gauls by Classical authors (Polybius 3:67; Livy 10:26; 23:24; Strabo 4:4,5; Diodorus Siculus 5:29; 14:115) and in the archaeological record, as at the *oppidum* of Entremont, Aix-en-Provence (Benoit 1955; 1975:44-58). This belongs to a much larger body

of evidence which attests the Celtic cult of the head (Lambrechts 1954; Ross 1958; 1967: 61-126; Burl 1981:210-33). However, annalistic sources suggest that decapitation was practised in early historic Ireland, as in the case of the battle of *Uchbad* or *Áth Senaig*, at Ballyshannon, Co Kildare, in which Aed mac Colggen, *Uí Cheinnselaig* over-king of *Laigin*, "... *militari mocrone capite truncatus est*" ("... was beheaded by a battle-sword") (AU sa 737; ed and trans MacAirt and MacNiocaill 1983: 190-1. See also, eg, AU sa 877, 882, 908). In addition, one of the scenes on the base of the eighth century north cross at Ahenny, Co Tipperary, depicts the funeral procession of a decapitated man. It may also be noted that the taking of decapitated heads in battle as trophies is suggested by tales such as that of the battle of Almain, in which the severed head of Donn Bó mac Con Brettan is said to have sung a lament for his army's defeat from a pillar in the feasting hall of his victors (ed and trans Stokes 1903:58-63; see also Ross 1967:120-1). This battle occurred in 722 (AFM sa 722; AI sa 722; AU sa 721), although Donn Bó's death is not actually recorded until 759 (AU sa 758; quoted on pp 132-3, above).

Jackson (1964:28) also attempts to use the religious context portrayed within the epic literature as a chronological indicator. From the absence of references to Christianity and the frequent invocation of "the Gods", he concludes that the tales were composed before the advent of Christianity, which effectively means that they belong to the Iron Age. However, it is doubtful whether such a direct correlation may be made between the religion of the society which is portrayed in the sources and the religion of the society in which they were composed and transmitted. *Beowulf* also illustrates this point. Although the contents



of this epic poem are ostensibly pagan in character, it is believed to have been composed within a monastery (Campbell 1971:283; Wormald 1978: 38-42, 48-58; Dumville 1981:141, 157-8).

This introduces the complex issues surrounding the nature of literature and its role in society. These concern primarily whether literature reflects the society within which it is composed, and therefore has a passive role, or whether it plays an active part in the dynamics of society (Finnegan 1977:42-6). Studies of the learned professions within early historic and Medieval Irish society emphasize their active role (Flower 1947:67-106; Williams 1971; Carney 1973; Byrne 1974). As clients of kings and nobles, *filidh* (poets), genealogists and historians were essentially disseminators of ideology. This could take a variety of forms, but includes the eulogizing of kings and their exploits within a constructed past which constitutes an almost timeless historical context and the recording and, in many cases, fabrication of royal genealogies in order to give kings long and distinguished ancestries (O'Rahilly 1946:221; Kelleher 1963:122, 124-6; 1968:142-3, 145-8; Byrne 1971:146-50; Ó Corráin 1969; 1970:225-6; 1971:38-9; 1978:34; cf Dumville 1977).

Fabricated genealogies constitute one form of the construction of the past, a phenomenon which is found in other genres of early Irish literature. For example, the annals, *díndshenchas* and hagiographies exhibit not only a desire to record the past, but to create the past. Thus, mythological entries comprise the beginning of several annalistic compilations, while other, ostensibly historical, but retrospective, entries occur within the annals (pp 39-45). Similarly, the *díndshenchas* are mythological in character and concern the constructed pasts in which

natural features were formed and monuments were built and named.

However, in many cases these sources do not appear to concern arbitrary places or monuments, but show a bias towards those which are associated with secular elites, such as the royal centres, which feature prominently in the *dindsenchas* (pp 18-9). This may be because the Church already had its own well-established historical origins with St Peter at Rome, possibly contrasting with the manner in which a secular history had to be written and perhaps even stimulating or provoking structures of secular power into constructing their own pasts.

Hagiographies, however, are also ideological in character in that they depict a constructed past in which the proselytizing activities and founding of churches by specific saints are recounted and, in many cases, exaggerated. The motive behind this may have been partly to increase the stature of the church's or monastery's (real or alleged) founder but, in some cases, may also be linked with a desire to promote and/or legitimize the claims of some monastic *paruchia*e (federations) of their authority over other churches. The Patrician lives, for example, portray St Patrick as having founded many churches in the west and midlands of Ireland, over which Armagh, the centre of the cult of St Patrick, then claimed authority (Sharpe 1982; 1984; pp 346-7, below).

Literacy, therefore, is a medium through which ideology may be promoted and disseminated. This is a consequence of the restricted distribution of literacy within society. Requiring specialist knowledge and materials, literacy was the preserve of the learned classes. It was controlled by their patrons, members of secular and ecclesiastical elites, and was employed in the legitimation and extension of both secular and ecclesiastical authority. In this manner, literacy is



integral to some of those processes which, it was claimed in chapter one (pp 1-3), characterize early historic Ireland - political centralization and the growth in power of the Church. For example, the types of structures of secular power which were emerging in early historic Ireland (and which may be characterized as proto-states or incipient states in the case of the larger over-kingships and dynasties) did so partly through their ability to construct their own historical antecedents not only in terms of ancestors and events but also a history for its spatial authority. This comprises those specific places within the landscape which have, or are portrayed as having had, royal associations. In this manner, therefore, two historical narratives - secular and ecclesiastical, epic literature and hagiography - emerged and are interplayed through their spatial content.

Given the active role which literacy appears to have had in early historic Ireland, it seems inconsistent to ascribe a passive role to epic literature which, if not composed, was at least transmitted and redacted during that period by a restricted literary class, probably within an ecclesiastical context. As a result, early Irish literature is unlikely to be reflective in character and therefore will not present a "... picture of the ancient Irish heroic way of life..." which is "... self-consistent... and highly circumstantial"; contrary to Jackson's (1964:28) claims.

This conclusion may be supported by consideration of the character of the contents of the epic literature. Jackson (1964:2) asserts that the Ulster Cycle "... contains very little that can reasonably or safely be taken for myth, or ought to be interpreted" as such. However, the superhuman characters and feats, fantastic animals and strong super-

natural element which pervade these sources strongly suggest that the epic literature is profoundly mythological in character. As such, these sources would appear not to reflect directly a social and historical reality. Rather, they may correspond with the definition of mythology given in chapter one (p 24). This is that mythology is neither fiction nor a reflection of an objective historical reality, but rather an interpretative medium and means of promoting and disseminating ideology. For example, while monuments feature prominently in early Irish mythology, they do so in a very specific manner. In order to demonstrate this, the dating evidence for the composition of the Ulster Cycle may be reiterated and the archaeological evidence from Navan Fort introduced.

In contrast to Jackson's (1964) interpretation, the form and contents of the tales of the Ulster Cycle appear not to be indicative of an Iron Age date of composition. Rather, the prose form and absence of prosodic structures suggest a literary composition, indicating that its composition belongs to the early historic period. In addition, the material culture and social practices depicted in the epic literature, including chariots, swords and decapitation, are equally, if not more, consistent with an early historic rather than an Iron Age date of composition. Jackson's dating of the composition of these tales to the Iron Age appears to be based on assumptions concerning the religious beliefs of the society in which the literature was composed, the apparent parallels between the society which is allegedly portrayed in the tales and the continental Celts as described in Classical sources, and the political context of an epic literature in which the *cóiceda* feature prominently. It is from these assumptions - all of which derive from the basic premise that the epic literature is reflective in



character - rather than unequivocal evidence, that Jackson (1964) derives his Iron Age dating of the composition of the tales of the Ulster Cycle.

The episodes of the Ulster Cycle are set in the time of the *cóiceda*, and Jackson (1964:46-8) uses this to demonstrate the allegedly Iron Age date of the epic literature. However, as Dumville (1985:94) notes, "... dating a text by the appearance in it of an old political system is a dangerous procedure where a traditional literature is concerned. The tradition of the 'historical' context could have ancient origins while any literary use of it might be very much more modern". The case against an Iron Age date of composition for this literature appears to be strengthened by the evidence discussed in chapter two. There, it is noted that there is no independent evidence for the existence of a five-fold division of Ireland during the Iron Age (pp 99-101). Rather, it is claimed that the *cóiceda* represent a cosmological scheme whose ideological function was to provide the "historical" context within which the legitimacy of the early historic provincial over-kingships and, more probably, the *Uí Néill*-inspired concept of a high-kingship of Ireland may be sought. The *cóiceda*, therefore, represent a construct of the past, an early historic conception of Ireland's former political division which is projected into the past in order to advance contemporary political aspirations (pp 103-27).

This also appears to be true of the portrayal of Navan Fort within the epic literature. Within the tales of the Ulster Cycle, *Emain Macha* is depicted as the fortified court of the king of Ulster. However, the form of its enclosing earthworks suggests that Navan Fort was not fortified or defensive in character, while the evidence of excavation

implies that the site was of ritual significance during the Iron Age (pp 87-91). There is no archaeological evidence of any activity within the enclosure during the early historic period (but see pp 91,93-4).

However, Navan Fort appears to be of ideological significance during the early historic period, as suggested by its association with royal activities, principally battles and the *Óenach Emna/Óenach Macha* (pp 137-49). Not only may Navan Fort have been perceived to be a symbol of immemorial royal office and authority but it also appears to have been deliberately portrayed as such. The monument, therefore, may have played an active role within the ideology of those kings who were associated with it during the early historic period (and whose identity will be discussed on pp 172-80).

Viewed within this context it is possible that the tales of the Ulster Cycle are integral to the ideological significance of Navan Fort because they seek to portray the royal associations and auspicious past of the monument. A similar intention may also be expressed in the *dindshenchas* on *Emain Macha* (ed and trans Stokes 1895a:279-83; Gwynn 1924:308-11) and in those mythological annalistic entries which seek to place the royal foundation of *Emain Macha* in the distant past, as in the *Annals of the Four Masters*, am 4532 (ie 668 BC) (trans O'Donovan 1856,1:73):

She [Macha, eponymous founder of *Emain Macha*] afterwards proceeded alone into Connaught, and brought the sons of Dithorba with her in fetters to Ulster, by virtue of her strength, and placed them in great servitude, until they should erect the fort of Eamhain, that it might always be the chief city of Uladh.

The *Annals of the Four Masters* is a late compilation (p 38) and the only other annalistic record of this occurs in the *Annals of Clonmacnoise* (sa



450 BC), which only survives as a seventeenth century translation. This, if anything, emphasizes the mythological status of these entries.

The tales of the Ulster Cycle, therefore, appear to be consistent, in terms of their structure and content, with an early historic date, and a literary mode, of composition. In addition, these sources may also constitute a manifestation of the ideological significance of Navan Fort, as revealed by its royal associations during the early historic period, although it is possible that the epic literature also conveyed a wider range of ideological meaning (pp 174-7, 199-201). However, the political context of that significance is unclear and will now be considered.

#### The Political Context of Navan Fort and the Ulster Cycle

One item of evidence which Jackson (1964:46-8) uses to date the composition of the tales of the Ulster Cycle to the Iron Age is the location of Navan Fort in relation to the territory of *Ulaíd*. Prior to the early historic period, *Ulaíd* is commonly believed to have comprised all northern Ireland. However, the commencement of the early historic period sees the *Ulaíd* confined to that area east of the River Bann, Lough Neagh and the Newry valley, the modern counties Antrim and Down. A key event in this appears to have been the battle of *Móin Dairí Lothair* (or *Móin Daire Lochair*, perhaps Moneymore, Co Tyrone) in 562 (AU sa 561), "... the most conspicuous result of which was the loss [ie from *Ulaíd*] to the Uí Néill of territory along the western bank of the Bann. Not indeed that the Uí Néill made any great use of their gain: too remote from the bulk of Uí Néill territory to be then adequately

controlled, it emerges later as part of the Airgialla" (MacNiocaill 1972:74).

The battle of *Móin Dairí Lothair* appears to have seen the eclipse of *Ulaíd* power in what is now Co Londonderry. Further south, however, the territory which *Ulaíd* is presumed to have controlled west of the Newry valley, an area now encompassed by the modern counties Armagh, Monaghan and the southern part of Tyrone, seems to have been lost before the commencement of the early historic period. During that period this area was occupied by the various kingdoms which comprised *Airgialla* (MacNiocaill 1972:12-5,39; Byrne 1973: *infra*). During the early historic period, therefore, Navan Fort lay outwith *Ulaíd* and this is cited as evidence that the tales of the Ulster Cycle were composed during the Iron Age, that is, while *Ulaíd* still held the area in which Navan Fort lies (Jackson 1964:48).

At face value this is an attractive argument. However, the context of epic literature is often removed - culturally, temporally and geographically - from its contents. To cite the analogy of *Beowulf* once again, this epic poem is set in the distant past of the Scandinavian Geats, and yet was composed in Anglo-Saxon England. In a similar vein, the Slavs were still composing epic poetry on the greatness of their former Turkish overlords long after the collapse of the Ottoman empire (Finnegan 1977:175).

However, in what is evidently a circular argument, the (traditional) early first millennium AD date of composition which is proposed for the tales of the Ulster Cycle (Ridgeway 1906) is used to prove the Iron Age antiquity of the *cóiceda* (MacNeill 1919:100-1; quoted on pp 62,64, above). In turn, the alleged Iron Age date of the five-fold political



division of Ireland is then employed to demonstrate the Iron Age composition of the tales of the Ulster Cycle (Jackson 1964:46-8).

Although it cannot be proved unequivocally, the evidence of structure and contents and the character of the epic literature suggests that the tales of the Ulster Cycle are literary compositions of the early historic period (pp 155-71). However, it would seem that the tales are set before the conversion to Christianity and the contraction of *Ulaid* east of the Bann. The episodes of the Ulster Cycle, therefore, portray a constructed past, the *Aimser na c'óicedach* ("time of the kings of the fifths"), a theme which is known to have been of interest to the synchronizing historians of the early historic period (O'Rahilly 1946: 177; pp 125-6, above). Thus, Byrne's (1973:71) claim that "Heroic ages are always evanescent..." may be disputed. They are not even that. It is not only heroes who are invented by their adulators, but also the ages of heroes. It is within such a constructed, mythological past that the concept of a timeless socio-political elite - primordial, natural and unchallengeable - is rooted.

It was claimed in chapter one (pp 43-9) that constructions of the past may be of ideological significance by seeking to portray the present from a different perspective. In this manner, the past may be used as a means of advancing aspirations and of legitimizing rank and authority in the present. This has already been considered in the case of the royal centres, whose portrayal as the capitals of the (allegedly) ancient *c'óiceda* should be viewed within the context of the political organization and evolution of early historic Ireland - the emergence of provincial over-kingships and attempts to create a high-kingship of Ireland (chap 2).

Similarly, it may be within this context - the politics of early historic Ireland - that the ideological significance of the tales of the Ulster Cycle may be sought. There may be a link between the ideological significance of Navan Fort, as suggested by its use as an assembly site and a battleground (pp 131-55) and the possible ideological significance of the episodes of the Ulster Cycle. Here, however, one must beware of falling into a circular argument. This is that the prominence of *Emain Macha* and the manner of its portrayal within the epic literature appears to indicate that the monument of Navan Fort was of ideological significance during the early historic period, and that the prominence of *Emain Macha* within the episodes of the Ulster Cycle suggests that the tales of the Ulster Cycle are ideological in nature.

The portrayal of *Emain Macha* as the fortified court of Conchobar mac Nessa, king of *Ulaid*, and capital of *Ulaid*, suggests that the ideological role of this epic literature is, in part at least, the establishment and consolidation of the perception of Navan Fort as a centre of royal authority. Thus, the association of royal activities with Navan Fort during the early historic period may suggest that kings were attempting to draw on the distinguished, ancient and royal past which was invested in Navan Fort and manifested in the portrayal of *Emain Macha* in the epic literature.

However, the more detailed application of this interpretation presents problems concerning the identity of the kings associated with Navan Fort during the early historic period and, indeed, the political context of the monument's significance generally. This is because, by the beginning of the early historic period, Navan Fort lay outwith *Ulaid*



(pp 172-3,177), although it seems that the monument was still of some symbolic significance to its kings (Warner 1988a:53):

... the over-king of the federation of the *Ulaíd*... was occasionally known in the Early Historic period as the king of *Emain* (now Navan, Co Armagh). This was a purely symbolic title, for this prehistoric royal/ritual capital of prehistoric 'Ulster' was by that time outside the *Ulaíd* king's area of influence...

As a result, it seems unlikely that the monument would have been a focus of the royal activities of the kings of *Ulaíd*, except, perhaps, in battle (pp 133-4,177-8).

Rather, the area of what is now Co Armagh was occupied by the kingdoms of *Airgialla* during the early historic period. The origins of *Airgialla* are obscure (MacNiocaill 1972:12), largely because of its emergence before the advent of contemporary historical recording and the reliance of historians on mythological sources. Even these are notable for "... viewing matters from an Uí Néill standpoint..." (ibid:14).

MacNiocaill (1972:14) proposes two alternative interpretations of the eclipse of *Ulaíd* power in Co Armagh and its supplanting by *Airgialla*:

... the Uí Néill defeated the *Ulaíd*, but left the land to crystallise into the *Airgialla* of historic times; with some kind of assurance against the return of the *Ulaíd*; or secondly that the *Ulaíd* were in fact defeated by the ancestors of the historic *Airgialla*, who were (at least in part) intruders from outside the territory ruled by the *Ulaíd*... the *Airgialla* may have been in origin peoples forced against the *Ulaíd* by pressure from the incipient Uí Néill dynasty behind them.

The sources relating to *Airgialla* are mainly genealogical and, according to Byrne (1973:74), "The genealogies... reveal that the *Airgialla* were not a coherent ethnic or dynastic group, and sometimes they hint at distinctly plebeian origins. When the *Ulaíd* once lost their military prestige, their vassal tribes may well have thrown off their yoke...". He goes on to state (ibid:108) that, "... the *Airgialla* were a

conglomeration of tributary peoples who had transferred their allegiance to the Uí Néill but were not strong enough to attack their old masters".

Genealogical tracts recount the victory of the three Collas, the founders of *Airgialla*, over *Ulaid* and the destruction of *Emain Macha*, "After seven battles, and with the help of the men of Connacht, they [the three Collas] slay Fergus Fogae, last king of Emain. The citadel is destroyed, the Ulaid retire across *Glenn Rige* (the Newry valley) to county Down, and the Collas found the kingdoms of *Airgialla* in the central portion of the old Fifth" (Byrne 1973:72). This appears to be a typical origin myth (on which see Ó Corráin 1985) and therefore must be distinguished from historical sources. Indeed, it may betray its mythological character by its portrayal of *Emain Macha* as the royal residence and capital of *Ulaid*.

This event is dated by the synchronizing historians to the mid-fourth century AD (AFM sa 331; trans O'Donovan 1856,1:125):

The battle of Achadh-leithdheirg, in Fearnmhagh, [was fought] by the three Collas against the Ulstermen, in which fell Fearghus Fogha, son of Fraechar Foirtriun, the last king of Ulster, [who resided] at Eamhain. They afterwards burned Eamhain, and the Ulstermen did not dwell therein since. They also took from the Ulstermen that part of the province [extending] from the Ríge [Newry River] and Loch nEathach [Lough Neagh] westwards.

That this entry purports to record an event some centuries before the advent of contemporary historical recording in the annals (pp 39-45) indicates it to be a later, mythological source. However, many historians have become confused by trying to relate chronologically this apparently mythologically event with the alleged foundation of the Church of Armagh by St Patrick (eg Byrne 1973:50), "... by the time that documentary history begins the glory of Emain was a thing of the past. It is a fair inference that the foundation of Armagh, traditionally



attributed to St Patrick in 444 or 457, implies that the neighbouring site of Emain Macha was still in existence..." (cf MacNiocaill 1972:14-5). Nevertheless, that this annalistic entry appears to make a direct correlation between the destruction of Navan Fort, as a symbol of royal power, and the defeat of the *Ulaíd* is of potential relevance to attempts at identifying a political context for the ideological significance of Navan Fort and the episodes of the Ulster Cycle.

Regardless of the status of these sources - mythological or historical - that Navan Fort lay some 23 km outwith the territory of *Ulaíd* during the early historic period appears to preclude the association of the kings of *Ulaíd* with the regular practice of royal activities at the monument. However, the parties involved in battles at Navan Fort may give some indication of the political context of the monument's significance.

In fact, an *Ulaíd* king of the *Dál Fiatach* dynasty, Fiachnae mac Aedo Roin (ob 789), is recorded as having been the victor of the battle of 759 (AU sa 758; quoted on pp 132-3). The slain included Donn Bo mac Con Brettan of *Fir Rois*, an *Airgialla* kingdom which was "affiliated to the *Airthir*" (Byrne 1973:118). *Airthir* is the *Airgialla* kingdom within whose territory Navan Fort and Armagh are located. As the battle occurred in *Airthir* territory and resulted in the death of a member of an affiliated kingdom, it may be inferred that *Ulaíd* was the aggressor in this case, rather than the kingdom which was ordinarily associated with Navan Fort. Byrne (1973:118) notes that "The *Annals of Tigernach* blame the conflict on Airechtach sacerdos of Armagh and his enmity to the abbot Fer-da-Chrich". This suggests a secular intrusion into ecclesiastical affairs, although both the clerics named belonged to

*Airthir* (albeit different septs). Regardless of the motive(s) involved, the location of the battle seems significant, an *Ulaíd* victory at the monument which was portrayed as their (former) royal centre. This may suggest the presence of a symbolic element in the motive(s) behind the battle and/or in the choice of battlefield. This may also be reflected in two ostensibly earlier entries in the *Chronicon Scotorum* (sa 576 and sa 577; trans Hennessy 1866b:61) which record the "First attempt of the Ulidians to re-establish themselves in Emhain", and the "Return of the Ulidians to Eamhain", respectively. If these entries are historical rather than mythological in nature then they are suggestive of a (presumably short-lived) attempt by the *Ulaíd* to retake the monument which was portrayed as their former royal capital and was therefore invested with considerable symbolic significance.

Navan Fort is widely held by archaeologists and historians to have been associated with the kings of *Ulaíd*. This apparent association may appear to be reinforced by the evidence of excavation, which did not reveal any activity later than Iron Age in date, and the apparent occupation of this area by the *Ulaíd* before, but not during, the early historic period. However, there is no evidence to link the kings of *Ulaíd* with Navan Fort during the Iron Age, a period which appears to see the site fulfilling a religious function (pp 87-91). In this case, the title *rí Emna*, which is occasionally applied to the over-king of *Ulaíd*, may be interpreted as a anachronism perpetuated by the chroniclers and/or a deliberate evocation of the perceived former greatness of *Ulaíd*. This title is itself a construction of the past which may be of ideological significance in that it conveys the royal associations of Navan Fort. In short, a sound case for the direct association - for



example, in terms of occupation or residence - of the *Ulaid*, their kings, and Navan Fort can be made during neither the Iron Age nor the early historic period. As the ideological significance of Navan Fort - as reflected in the battles and *óenach* held there and its portrayal in a range of literary genres - is attested during the early historic period, it seems more realistic to infer that the monument was invested with ideological value by the kingdom within whose territory it was located during that period, *Airthir*. *Airthir* was a small kingdom whose authority may have been ecclesiastical rather than secular in character, exerted through its tenure of the major ecclesiastical offices at Armagh, which lay within its territory. This was already the case before the *Cenél nEógain* victory over *Airgialla* in the battle of *Leth Cam* in 827, with *Cenél nEógain* - the most powerful of the northern *Uí Néill* dynasties - supporting *Airthir* candidates for the abbacy.

Given the minor stature of *Airthir*, other than in terms of its ecclesiastical authority, it is possible that its kings sought to project the status and legitimacy of their office as being descended from a powerful and ancient kingship whose former royal centre was Navan Fort. *Airthir*, and perhaps *Airgialla* as a whole, may have sought to assert its autonomy against its powerful neighbours, *Cenél nEógain* and *Ulaid*. A symbolic means of doing this may have involved using as a centre for royal activities a monument which both conferred the legitimacy of the past and also symbolized the eclipse of *Ulaid* power west of *Glenn Ríge* at the hands of the ancestors of *Airgialla*.

In the absence of further evidence, however, this interpretation must be regarded as speculative. It is proposed here because the political geography of northern Ireland during the early historic period

and the reappraisal of the date of composition of the episodes of the Ulster Cycle (Aitchison 1987; pp 155-71, above) indicate that alternatives to the association of *Ulaíd* with Navan Fort must be considered.

Similar problems are encountered in attempting to identify the political context(s) of the composition and transmission of the Ulster Cycle. While the tales concern *Ulaíd* and its heroes, the *Ulaíd* are not always portrayed in a favourable light. For example, they are made to seem ridiculous from their wild, drunken circuit of Ireland in *Mesca Ulaíd* ("The Intoxication of the *Ulaíd*"), which Gantz (1981:189) describes as "... a splendidly comic tale. What might have been a heroic foray is reduced to a drunken stagger...". Indeed, Gantz detects strong elements of parody and satire in several tales. For example, "In 'The Death of Aife's Only Son', the *Ulaíd* are awestruck by the feats of a seven-year-old boy; in 'The Tale of Macc Dá Thó's Pig', *Ulaíd* and Connachta are reduced to fighting over a dog..." (ibid:25; cf ibid:179-80, 188-9, 220). Ó Corráin (1985:86) makes the point that "... *Scéla mucce meic Dáthó*, dated to AD 800, seems to be a sophisticated parody of the heroic genre as represented by *Táin Bó Cualgne*...". Gantz (1981:25) concludes that "... the society of the Ulster Cycle, for all the splendour that attaches to it, is a society in decline".

The satirical element of the epic tales may suggest that, rather than the tales proclaiming the glory of *Ulaíd*, they actually celebrate the passing of the old order of *Ulaíd* rule over northern Ireland. It is possible that one of those smaller kingdoms which emerged with the former territory of *Ulaíd* over-kingship, such as *Airgialla*, may have had a hand in this (Aitchison 1987:111). This may be refined in the light of criticism by Ó hUiginn (1988:19):



While it is undoubtedly true that some tales show the Ulaíd in a poor light, the general tenor of the cycle is extremely favourable to them. Tales belonging to the Ulster Cycle were certainly written and redacted outside the territory of the Ulaíd, but this does not mean that we must seek its origins among people who were hostile to them and who celebrated their demise.

The resolution of this may lie in the long history of transmission which the episodes of the Ulster Cycle represent. For instance, it may be postulated that the tales did have an Ulster origin, of uncertain form and date, but that the form in which they have survived represents literary composition by a party or parties who were not overly concerned with portraying the *Ulaíd* in a favourable light. It is possible that the tales underwent a transformation from genuine heroic tales to the more parodic and satirical versions which survive in Medieval redactions. The scribe who copied the oldest surviving version of the *Táin*, in the manuscript compilation *Lebor na hUidre* ("The Book of the Dun Cow"), appears not to have been impressed (trans Byrne 1973:48):

But I who have written this history or rather fable, do not give credit to much of it. For some things in it are the tricks of demons and others the figments of poets; some things are plausible, others not; and some are there for the entertainment of fools.

*Lebor na hUidre* was copied in the monastery of Clonmacnoise, Co Offaly, by three scribes, one of whom was killed in 1106. This indicates that interest in this literature existed within ecclesiastical *scriptoria* and extended beyond Ulster, by that date at least.

In the processes of transmission through space and time it is probable that the tales would have been transformed according to the context in which they were performed. These processes of transformation are likely to have been accentuated by the fact that a literary-composed version of the *Táin* is known to have been transmitted orally during the early historic period before being committed to writing no later than

the eleventh century (Dumville 1981:152-4). Indeed, evidence of a complex interaction between literary and oral modes of composition (ibid:153; cf Finnegan 1977:20) may suggest that this, and possibly other episodes of the Cycle, potentially may have been transformed considerably between their literary composition and their redaction in Medieval manuscript compilations. Carney (1983:127) defines this process in literary terms only, identifying "... a constant policy in early Irish monastic schools of revising early traditions for either religious or political reasons. These 'revisions' could go as far as fictional creation, and this, once embarked upon, could become a habit". It is these processes which may have resulted in the transformation of heroic epics composed in *Ulaíd* into versions which bordered on parody.

Indeed, if the tales of the Ulster Cycle originally did represent *Ulaíd* compositions, then the *Ulaíd* were almost asking for them to be parodied. Although *Ulaíd* was still a powerful and influential over-kingdom during the early historic period (Byrne 1973:74), any self-glorification in its heroic literature may have sounded more than a little hollow to many ears. This is a possible consequence of the eclipse of *Ulaíd* power over northern Ireland, traditionally at the hands of a group of vassal kingdoms, the *Airgialla* (ibid:73), and its territorial confinement east of the Bann.

An added dimension to the apparent element of parody and satire within the episodes of the Ulster Cycle may be inferred from the social context of the tales' composition and transmission. Literacy was introduced to Ireland with the conversion and, because of the specialized knowledge and materials required, was restricted within society. The major literary centres of early historic Ireland appear to



have been within the larger ecclesiastical foundations, where the study of literature, history and computation flourished, possibly resulting in the type of cross-fertilization and cross-referencing which may be attested, for example, in the recording of the *Táin* in the *Annals of Tigernach* (sa c 19 BC, p 157, above). In particular, Bangor, Co Down, is identified as an important and early centre of learning (p 33) and one which may have been involved in the composition of the Ulster Cycle epic literature (MacCana 1962:103; Ó hUiginn 1988:20).

Similarly, monastic centres were also engaged in the transmission of epic literature, as the copying of the *Táin* at Clonmacnoise, c 1100, attests. Furthermore, ecclesiastical involvement in transmission is confirmed at an earlier date by the manuscript collection *Cín Droma Snechta* (on which see pp 160-1). Its contents indicate that at least some tales which are now recognised as belonging to the Ulster Cycle were in existence by the first half of the eighth century, although it is possible that the *Táin* in its developed form, as preserved in *Lebor na hUidre*, may represent a later conflation of pre-existing tales. On this evidence, and that of the eighth century date of the language of the *Lebor na hUidre* version of the *Táin*, Aitchison (1987:101-2) assigns a late eighth century date of composition to this epic. Ó hUiginn (1988: 19) claims that the first references to the *Táin* appear in the seventh century Leinster genealogies and that "... between then and the ninth century the primary versions of most of the great tales of the [Ulster] cycle... were composed", which may be consistent with the dating just given. Carney (1983:114) also tends to the opinion that the *Táin* "... seems to have been written in some form about the seventh century...".

One of the interesting things about *Cín Droma Snechta* is that it was compiled at *Druim Snechta*, a monastery in Co Monaghan, which lay within the territory of *Airgialla*. This may suggest the involvement of monastic *scriptoria* outside *Ulaid* in the transmission, and perhaps even composition, of Ulster Cycle tales by the eighth century. Indeed, it is possible that Armagh itself was involved in this process, and its location may have been significant in this respect. It lies some 20 km from *Ulaid* territory, within an area which formerly comprised part of *Ulaid*, and only 2.5 km from Navan Fort. Furthermore, Armagh had an important and prolific *scriptoria*, as its Patrician hagiographical writings attest.

Ó hUiginn (1988:19) criticizes Aitchison's (1987) attempt to identify the political context of the Ulster epics on the grounds that: Had the *Uí Néill* or the *Airgialla* wished to cultivate literature for ideological purposes... it seems far more likely that they would have glorified their own ancestors, rather than writing about those of the *Ulaid*, and the reason that they did not do so may well be due to the fact that many of their monasteries were busily occupied in propagating the Patrician legend.

However, the *Airgialla*, in contrast to the *Ulaid*, may simply have had no previous historical or mythological tradition. This may be why their origins are so obscure and why the raid of the three Collas and the destruction of *Emain*, apparently the origin myth of *Airgialla* and an overt expression of the overthrow of *Ulaid* rule, only survives as incidental detail in the Leinster genealogies. Even this appears to have been recorded from a *Uí Néill* perspective (MacNiocaill 1972:14).

In the apparent absence of an heroic tradition within *Airgialla*, it is possible that scribes of ecclesiastical foundations in its territories, such as Armagh and *Druim Snechta*, turned to the epic literature of neighbouring *Ulaid*. In doing so, the *Airgialla* were



perhaps attempting to construct or even appropriate a past, to fill a mytho-historical gap by defining their existence in a relation to that of neighbouring *Ulaíd*. *Beowulf* may be cited as an analogy in this context. In the absence of a past relating to their adoptive homeland, *Beowulf* concerns a timeless and mythological past set amongst the Scandinavian *Geats* - an Anglo-Saxon origin myth (on which see Howe 1989: 143-80). Indeed, during the early historic period, the episodes of the Ulster Cycle may have constituted the only substantial body of heroic literature, as the Fenian and Mythological Cycles appear to be later compositions. This may explain the widespread appeal of the Ulster Cycle and why, "... by the eighth century... the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* and its cycle of related sagas about Conchobar mac Nessa's court at Emain Macha and the exploits of Cú Chulainn had achieved the status of a national epic in Irish literature" (Byrne 1973:106).

Moreover, Ó hUiginn's point that monasteries were too busy producing Patrician hagiographies to be concerned with epic literature ignores the fact that early Irish epic literature and hagiography are fundamentally similar. Both concern central characters, and the portrayal of saints is often akin to that of the allegedly pagan heroes of the epic literature (Hughes 1966:146-7; Binchy 1982). Indeed, the St Patrick of hagiographical tradition gives the impression, in his personality and actions, of being only nominally Christian (cf Binchy 1962a:41-2). As at least some hagiographical literature is ideological in inspiration (pp 166-7, 345-8, 363), it is possible that epic literature - which appears to belong to a similar social and historical context - may have had a further ideological dimension within an ecclesiastical milieu. This will be considered in the following section.

## Navan Fort Within Ecclesiastical Ideology

Within an ecclesiastical context the ideological significance of Navan Fort is dependent upon its perceived relationship with Cathedral Hill, Armagh (IGR H 874452), the site of an early and important ecclesiastical foundation. This relationship is manifested in a variety of ways. These include the spatial proximity of the two sites, which lie only 2.5 km apart (*contra* Wailes 1982:8), their toponymy and their association in some literary sources. Both hill-tops may have been occupied by later prehistoric enclosures and associated with ritual activity. Navan Fort, of course, comprises a large earthwork enclosure which, if not actually belonging to the late Bronze Age/Iron Age, was at least the focus of a long period of activity during later prehistory (pp 85-91), while Cathedral Hill appears to have been occupied by an enclosure of Iron Age date (pp 221-49). In addition, a physical link between the two hill-tops, in the form of a possible "ancient road" (Warner 1986:7, no 8; see also Paterson 1953:67; Pollard 1984:51), may exist, although the problems in dating this feature and determining its exact relationship with both Cathedral Hill and Navan Fort mean that it is of uncertain relevance and therefore will not be discussed here.

That a relationship did, or was perceived to, exist between Armagh and Navan Fort is indicated by their Old Irish placenames, *Ard Macha* and *Emain Macha*. The shared second element has been regarded from the early historic period as evidence that the two sites were associated, and around topography and toponymy has grown a body of mythology. This comprises primarily the account in *Echtra Machae* ("The Twins of Macha"), which is the *dindsenchas* of *Emain Machae* (ed and trans Stokes 1895a: 279-83; Gwynn 1924:124-31) and the Ulster Cycle tale, *Nóinden Ulad* ("The



Labour Pains of the *Ulaíd*") (trans Gantz 1981:128-9; see also Toner 1988:32). These associate both sites with, and derive their names from, Macha, a shadowy figure who may be a euhemerized sun-goddess (O'Rahilly 1946:290-4,472) but who is portrayed in other sources as a goddess of war (Ross 1967: *infra*; Le Roux and Guyonvarc'h 1983). In contrast, Arthurs (1953) claims that \**macha* is a geographical term, meaning "plain", from which both place and goddess derived their names.

There is also controversy about the other element of the name. In common with the mythological and topographical sources, the first element of the name *Emain Macha* was believed to have been derived from *emuín*. The meaning of this word which is given in the late ninth century *Sanas Chormaic* ("Cormac's Glossary") (ed and trans O'Donovan and Stokes 1868:63; see also Marstrander 1911b; Joynt and Knott 1932: cols 121-2) is "twins", although Arthurs (1953:40) dismisses this. Reviewing the toponymic evidence, Toner (1988:33-4) identifies this as a later element within the epic literature and it appears to be linked with the myth of the birth of twins to Macha, as recounted in the *díndshenchas* and in *Noínden Ulad*. However, the presence of *Echtra Machae* in the early eighth century compilation *Cín Droma Snechta* (MacCana 1972:108) indicates that the myth of the twins of Macha dates from the earlier part of the early historic period at least. The significance of this myth may be that Macha's twins constitute a metaphor of the relationship between *Emain Macha* and *Ard Macha*.

*Sanas Chormaic* (ed and trans O'Donovan and Stokes 1868:63), however, provides an etymological alternative, claiming that *emain* is derived from the word for brooch, its significance allegedly relating to Macha's creation of the earthworks of Navan Fort by impressing her

brooch upon the hill-top. Both etymologies appear to be typical of the (often fanciful) toponymies found in the topographical literature. The fact that there are two contrasting early historic etymologies for *Emain* may suggest that the original meaning and derivation of the name were unknown and that it was therefore invested with new meaning(s). Toner's (1988:33) conclusion is that "*Emain*, then, would appear to be a name for the Irish Otherworld...", possibly denoting or reinforcing the ritual status of both sites.

Despite the etymological uncertainty surrounding the names, the toponymic and mythological evidence indicates the existence of a perceived relationship between the two hill-tops, although it does not reveal the nature of that relationship. Indeed, the relationship which the names appear to attest may pre-date the early historic period, and, if Macha is a pagan goddess, may be linked with the possibility that Cathedral Hill, as well as Navan Fort, was a focus of later prehistoric ritual activity (Ross 1967:115-6; Rynne 1972:80,82; Brown and Harper 1985:110; pp 231-47, below).

The spatial relationship between Cathedral Hill and Navan Fort features prominently in the debate surrounding St Patrick and the foundation of the Church of Armagh. From hagiographical sources of the mid-seventh century onwards, the foundation of this church traditionally has been attributed to St Patrick, and much emphasis was formerly laid on the annalistic entries of this event (AU sa 444; AFM sa 457). However, the conflicting nature of these dates suggests a degree of uncertainty amongst the annalists, while the (allegedly) early dates of the entries reveal them not as contemporary but as retrospective, and perhaps mythological, ones (cf pp 39-45). Indeed, these entries appear



to belong to a larger group of allegedly early church foundations recorded in the annals and which are of questionable veracity (cf Hughes 1966:67; pp 207,346, below). The significance of St Patrick's alleged choice of site is commonly believed to be its proximity to Navan Fort. This may be seen to be of particular significance if one interprets Navan Fort as the fortified residence of the ancient kings of *Ulaid*, an interpretation which is based largely on the portrayal of this monument as *Emain Macha* in the episodes of the Ulster Cycle and which has persisted even after the excavation of Navan Fort. Thus, the relationship between Cathedral Hill and Navan Fort is perceived to be one between ritual and secular authority: "Armagh was selected [as the site of St Patrick's church] because it lay beside the chief royal residence of the Province to which Patrick's missionary labours were largely confined" (Binchy 1962a:152-3; cf Hughes 1966:71,76,89,119; Hanson 1968:197-8; Binchy 1970:35; Byrne 1973:82; Richter 1988:46).

However, a major problem besetting the study of the relationship between Armagh and Navan Fort is the reliance which has been placed upon mythological sources. These consist primarily of Patrician hagiographies and the episodes of the Ulster Cycle, both of which are involved in the construction of a history which is firmly linked to specific places within the landscape. Only recently have some of the assumptions arising from the literal acceptance of these sources been challenged. Sharpe (1982), for instance, reappraises the evidence for the association of St Patrick with Armagh. There is no question of the authenticity of the association of the cult of St Patrick with Armagh, but this is very different from an association with the saint himself. The problem here is the absence of evidence between the alleged date of St Patrick's

foundation of the Church of Armagh in the mid-fifth century and the historical attestation of Armagh as an important ecclesiastical centre c 640 (ibid:34-5). Against this background, the annalistic entries purporting to record the foundation of the church may be considered to be retrospective in nature and ideological in function. These sources seek to demonstrate the legitimacy and prestige of the church by claiming an early date of foundation and an eminent founder.

Sharpe (1982:40-4) argues convincingly that the focus of the cult of St Patrick, and therefore probably the area of St Patrick's missionary activities, was originally located in south-east *Ulaid* and centred upon Downpatrick, Co Down. Only at a later date was his cult transferred to Armagh. There is, it would seem, no admissable evidence for the association of the actual St Patrick with Armagh. Despite some scepticism (eg Lambkin 1987), this argument would appear to be gaining acceptance (eg Thompson 1985:94). As a result, the date of the foundation of the Church of Armagh remains uncertain and does not appear to be clarified by any purportedly historical sources. It is possible that excavation may provide a solution to this problem, but the dating evidence for the earliest ecclesiastical activity on Cathedral Hill which was yielded by the only excavations to date (Brown and Harper 1985) is ambiguous (pp 226-33). However, later activity on the hill-top, in the form of construction and grave-digging, is likely to have disturbed much of the evidence of the earliest ecclesiastical foundation (cf Hamlin 1984:126; but see p 220, below).

As a result of the excavations at Navan Fort, the argument that St Patrick founded his church adjacent to the royal capital of *Ulaid* shifts slightly in order to accommodate the new evidence, but remains



essentially unchanged. Both Hughes (1972:178) and Stancliffe (1980:64) attribute the choice of Cathedral Hill to its juxtaposition with a pagan religious site which was closely associated with the kings of *Ulaid*. However, the discovery of a number of apparently pagan religious sculptures within the graveyard of St Patrick's Church of Ireland Cathedral (Porter 1934; Macalister 1935; Paterson and Davies 1940b:90-1; Corcoran 1959:237; Ettlinger 1961:286-9; Henry 1965:8; Rynne 1972:80,82) suggests to Ross (1967:115; cf Sharpe 1982:52-4) that the first Church of Armagh was deliberately founded on an active pagan religious site:

The Protestant Cathedral in Armagh... is the repository of several objects of a patently cult nature, including at least two obviously early heads. The hill on which the Cathedral is built has clearly been a cult centre since pagan times, and the nature of these stones, especially the animals... strongly suggests that this was the site of a pre-Christian shrine. The attention which St Patrick paid to the hill supports this supposition, and implies that the Christian faith was superimposed upon a flourishing pagan sanctuary.

According to Muirchu (*Vita Sancti Patricii* 1:24. (1); ed and trans Bieler 1979:108-9), writing c 670, St Patrick, when he sought a site for the Church of Armagh, first asked for a hill-top which was owned by Daire, a "*homo dives et honorabilis*" - perhaps a noble or even a king: There was a wealthy and honoured man in the territory of Airther, whose name was Daire. Holy Patrick asked him to give him a place wherein to worship... that hill which is called Druim(m) Sailech... He, however, did not want to give the holy man that lofty place, but gave him another place, lower down, where there is now the Burial-Ground of the Martyrs (*fertae martyrum*) beside Armagh, and there holy Patrick lived with his followers.

The site is that of *Teampul na Ferta* (pp 272-6).

A later source, the *Vita tripartita*, written between 895 and 901, provides some additional details (trans Stokes 1887,1:229): Patrick went, at the word of the angel, to Armagh (*don Machai*) to the place where Rath-Dari stands today. Therein abode a certain rich, honourable man, named Dare... Patrick asked him for the site of his cell. Said Dare: 'What place dost thou desire?' 'On this great hill below', saith Patrick, - the place wherein Armagh stands to-day. 'I will not give it', saith Dare: 'howbeit I will give thee

a place for thy church in this strong rath below' - the place where is the *Ferta* ('grave') today. So Patrick founded [his cell and remained] therein a long time.

This account is sometimes used to claim that the site of Patrick's foundation was previously occupied by a *ráith* (Henry 1967:40), although the source implies that this was not the *Ráith Dáiri*. A *ráith* is a "fort" (Flanagan 1981:16) or, more specifically, "An earthen rampart surrounding a chief's residence, a fort..." (Joynt 1944: col 17). However, this episode is conspicuous by its absence from the earlier account (above). Little confidence, therefore, can be placed in the hagiographical tradition that the Church of Armagh was founded within a pre-existing settlement. Nevertheless, it should be noted that excavation on Cathedral Hill has revealed a ditch which may belong to an enclosure and date to the Iron Age (pp 221-49).

Interestingly, the interpretation of the nature of the relationship between Navan Fort and the Church of Armagh - that the church was deliberately founded adjacent to the contemporary pagan royal residence of *Emain Macha* - contrasts with an earlier one. Bury (1905:160) and Kenney (1929:323-4) both claim that St Patrick founded his church close to the *ruined* capital of *Ulaid* and consequently do not attach much importance to this relationship. However, the significance of the location of the Church of Armagh may be that it both occupied an earlier pagan religious centre and was located in close proximity to the monument of Navan Fort. Thus, the founders of the Church of Armagh may have been seeking to draw upon the status of Cathedral Hill as an already established religious centre and/or on the royal associations and ideological significance of Navan Fort. Although only circumstantial, the spatial relationship between Cathedral Hill and Navan Fort



may represent a manifestation of the relationship which existed between structures of secular and ritual authority during the conversion process. Such a relationship, or at least the perceived existence of such a relationship, may be attested in later hagiographical accounts of the foundation of the Church of Armagh, such as *Vita tripartita* (trans Stokes 1887,1:231,237; quoted on p 294), in which the kings and nobles of *Airthir* are said to participate in the rituals surrounding the foundation of the church.

However, a number of literary sources suggest that the ecclesiastical perception of Navan Fort changed during the early historic period. For instance, the late Old Irish poem *Genair Phatraic* (trans Stokes and Strachan 1903:317) states that "In *Ard Macha* is the kingdom; long since has *Emain* been/ forsaken...". The *Vita tripartita* also contrasts the two sites. While Armagh will have St Patrick's "dignity and... pre-eminence", "*Emain* of the heroes will be waste" (trans Stokes 1887,1:253). This theme is echoed in the *dindshenchas* (trans Gwynn 1924:131):

O King that broughtest *Emain* to desolation, after it was deserted by its brave host, let not my soul be sad in thine house, after singing psalms of poets in the noble plain.

The theme of these sources appears to be similar to that which is expressed more forcefully in *Féilire Óengusso* (S23-7; trans Greene and O'Connor 1967:65), which contrasts the pagan royal centres with Christian sites:

The great settlement (*borg*) of Tara has died with the loss of its princes; great Armagh lives on with its choirs of scholars... The fortress (*ráith*) of *Cruachain* has vanished with Ailill, victory's child; a fair dignity greater than kingdoms is in the city (*cathir*) of Clonmacnoise...

The proud settlement (*borg*) of *Aillín* has died with its boasting hosts; great is victorious Brigit and lovely her thronged sanctuary.

The fort of *Emain Machae* (*dún Emna*) has melted away, all but its stones; thronged Glendalough is the sanctuary of the western world.

Old cities (*sencathraig*) of the pagans to which length of occupation has been refused are deserts without worship like Lugaid's place...

Paganism has been destroyed though it was splendid and far-flung; the kingdom of God the Father has filled heaven and earth and sea. the great hills of evil have been cut down with spear-points, while the glens have been made into hills.

This source is claimed to have been composed c 800 (Stokes 1905:vii), but the assumption that *borg* is a borrowing from Old Scandinavian may suggest it to be slightly later.

These sources contrast flourishing ecclesiastical foundations with abandoned pagan royal centres, and Armagh with *Emain Macha* in particular. The antithesis which they create between Armagh and Navan Fort may be of ideological significance in the sense that it is used, either explicitly or implicitly, to emphasize the pre-eminence of Christianity and its triumph over paganism. The theme and inspiration of this appears to be "How are the mighty fallen" (2 Samuel 1:19). The point would not have been lost upon an eighth or ninth century audience that *Emain Macha*, which was perceived to have been the fortified royal capital of all northern Ireland, was now no more than a grass-grown hill. The relationship between Armagh and Navan Fort which these sources project is therefore a metaphor of the relationship between Christianity and paganism. Indeed, the "incorporation" of pagan locations within the Christian landscape, which is attested by sources such as *Félire Óengusso*, may be viewed as a metaphor of conversion - the defeat of paganism and its incorporation within a Christian universe.

By the period to which these sources belong, Christianity was firmly established within Irish society (Hughes 1966:134). The large monastic communities were flourishing and had been seeking to extend their spheres of ecclesiastical authority for some time, while a



tradition of hagiographical writing was thriving within some of these foundations. At the same time, ecclesiastical offices within many foundations were held by lay persons and had become hereditary (ibid: 158-66). It is against this background of increasing secularization that the ascetic reform movement, the *Céli Dé* ("Clients of God") (ibid:173-93; O'Dwyer 1981), emerges as a potent ecclesiastical movement.

This period, therefore, sees Christianity established within society and influential within secular politics. The fervour which the *Céli Dé* appear to have possessed, and which they may have engendered among other Christian communities, may have been expressed not only in their commitment to asceticism, but also in their attitudes to secular authority, paganism, and perhaps the past in general. It is within this context that incidents such as the prevention of the high-king of Ireland, Aed Oirdnidhe mac Niall, from holding the *Óenach Tailten* by the *Céli Dé* community of Tallaght in 811 should be viewed (AU sa 810; trans MacAirt and MacNiocaill 1983:267. The corresponding entry in AFM is sa 806):

The fair of Tailtiu (*Óinigh Tailten*) was prevented from being held on Saturday under the aegis of Aed son of Niall, neither horse nor chariot arriving there. It was the community of Tamlacht who caused the boycott after the Uí Neill had violated the sanctuary (*termon*) of Tamlacht of Mael Ruain; and many gifts were subsequently made to the community of Tamlacht.

Aed Oirdnidhe's cursing by the monastic *familia* of Columcille at Tara in 817 (AU sa 816; trans MacAirt and MacNiocaill 1983:273) may constitute another manifestation of this relationship between secular authority and the reformed, ascetic ecclesiastical institutions: "Colum Cille's community went to Temair to excommunicate Aed". These incidents would appear to be powerful demonstrations that Christianity was no longer dependent upon royal patronage, or the assimilation of pagan social

practices and places, in order to maintain its position within society. Rather, that many abbots came from royal dynasties attests the close relationship between, in some cases even interdependence of, royal and ritual authority.

As Navan Fort appears not to have been a centre of paganism during the early historic period, but a focus of royal activity (pp 131-55), this literature probably conveys ideas, not only about paganism and the past, but also about contemporary relations of power between structures of secular and ecclesiastical authority. Within an ecclesiastical context, therefore, the royal centres symbolize the folly of secular ambition. This may also be illustrated by the *óenaige*, which, as a manifestation of their ideological significance, are usually associated with a monument, or group of monuments (Westropp 1919:9-10; Ettlinger 1954:30; pp 142-5, above), and whose foundation is attributed to mythological ancestors, kings and deities who belong to an immemorial past (Ettlinger 1954). Those monuments are invariably pagan, while the origin myths concern characters who appear to be portrayed as euhemerized pagan deities.

The sentiments of the Christian sources quoted above, and the possible background to those incidents at *Tailtiu* and Tara in 811 and 817 respectively, are that the Church appears to be castigating secular rulers for those aspects of their ideology which draw on a pagan past. This, therefore, may be identified as an attempt by the Church to extend its influence and power within dynasties and kingships by promoting Christianity as a means of legitimizing royal authority. In turn, this may have been associated with attempts to assert a Christian concept of kingship: "... clerics... did much to enhance kingship by their intro-



duction of wider political ideas concerning the royal office and by acting as servitors of the great dynasties" (Ó Corráin 1978:16). Certainly, it is in the period between the mid-eighth and mid-ninth centuries during which the northern *Uí Néill* kings, primarily those of *Cenél nEógain*, appear to have become closely associated with the Church of Armagh. It seems possible that the Church, in its rituals, was impinging on the function of secular institutions of pagan origin, such as the *benaige*, in maintaining and extending asymmetrical relations of power within society, and thereby exerting its own influence to a greater degree.

However, the ideological significance of the relationship which is created between Armagh and Navan Fort within these sources may relate not only to the relationship between ritual and secular authority, but also to relations of power between different structures of ritual authority. From the mid-seventh century, the most powerful ecclesiastical foundations in Ireland were attempting to promote and legitimize their claims of ecclesiastical primacy (pp 345-8). Foremost amongst these, and ultimately successful, was Armagh (Hughes 1966:111-20; de Paor 1971; Sharpe 1984a; Richter 1988:97-100). As the episodes of the Ulster Cycle appear to have been composed within an ecclesiastical context, possibly within the *paruchia* of Armagh (p 184), it is possible that their portrayal of *Emain Macha* is of ideological significance in a different manner to that discussed above (pp 181-6). For instance, *Emain Macha* is depicted as a royal centre, the capital of *Ulaíd*. In a subtle manner, however, these sources, and more explicitly the poetry quoted above (p 194), appear to celebrate the decline of the pagan kingship and the eclipse of *Emain Macha* as a pagan royal centre. Therefore, one

reason for their emphasis of the opposition between *Emain Macha* and Armagh may have been the intention that some of the power and prestige of the perceived focus of pagan secular authority could have been transferred to the centre of Christian ritual authority by virtue of their discrimination and Armagh's (alleged) triumph over paganism. In this manner, Armagh may have been attempting to assert its position as the natural, Christian, successor to what was portrayed as the most powerful pagan royal centre in northern Ireland. The analogy which may be cited here is the manner in which Tara is portrayed in the Patrician hagiographies. Muirchu (I 10(9). (1); quoted on p 124) depicts Tara as the seat of the high-kingship of Ireland, where Patrick confronts (victoriously, of course) the high-king and his druids. Thus, Armagh appears to have been casting itself as the ecclesiastical equivalent of, but also superior to, the *Uí Néill*-conceived high-kingship of Ireland: "... in the interests of Armagh's primatial ambitions the seventh century hagiographers Muirchu and Tirechan wished to attach Patrick to the new *Uí Néill* high-kingship and developed the impressive but probably quite artificial legend of his confrontation with Loeguire son of Niall and his druids at Tara" (Byrne 1973:50). *Féilire Óengusso* (quoted on p 194) is also notable for pairing Tara and Armagh and contrasting their fortunes.

The hypothesis, therefore, is that the opposition between Armagh and *Emain Macha* which is evident in the literature was also intended to further Armagh's status and prestige, presumably with the intention of contributing to the legitimation of its claim of ecclesiastical primacy. Certainly, in its hagiographical products and its use of monuments (using the term in its widest sense) - boundaries, high crosses and



ecclesiastical buildings - within Armagh, the Church of Armagh appears to demonstrate a great propensity for generating constructions of the past and employing them in the pursuit of its ecclesiastical and political aspirations (chaps 5 and 6). This, it seems, may apply equally to Navan Fort and to the Ulster Cycle epic literature.

## Conclusion

Although there is no archaeological evidence of any activity at Navan Fort subsequent to the first century BC, the monument appears to have been of considerable importance during the early historic period. This is implied by the investment within Navan Fort of meaning and value, the primary expressions of which are its association with royal activities, such as battles and an *óenach*, and its literary portrayal as the fortified royal capital of ancient *Ulaíd*. This meaning and value is ideological in nature and is manifested within both secular and ecclesiastical contexts.

If the reappraisal of the date and political context of composition of the tales of the Ulster Cycle (Aitchison 1987; pp 155-71, above) is accepted, then it may be possible to regard this literature - and, by implication, Navan Fort - as encapsulating a range of ideological meaning, the precise reading of which depends on the style, mode and context of its presentation. Although the episodes of the Ulster Cycle originally may have portrayed *Ulaíd* and its champions in the aura of heroism, the form in which they are preserved in Medieval manuscripts suggests that these tales are set in the past. This past is the pre-Christian era which is attested in the writings of St Patrick and in which the antecedents of both contemporary secular and Christian

authority lay. The epic tales give the impression, in their tone and in their treatment of characters and events, that they comprise neither a portrayal of contemporary society nor the product of the society which the literature concerns, the *Ulaíd*. Similarly, Navan Fort, the monument which is portrayed as *Emain Macha*, fortified capital of *Ulaíd*, seems unlikely to have been of ideological significance to the *Ulaíd* during the early historic period because it lay outwith their territory.

Despite this, there may have been a vested interest and an ideological motive on the part of other structures of authority in maintaining the perceived association of *Ulaíd* and Navan Fort. Through the possible appropriation and transformation - one might almost say subversion - of epic literature concerning the heroic exploits of the *Ulaíd*, other groups could create their own ideology in terms of contrasting their fortunes with those of *Ulaíd*. Thus, the overall impression gained from the episodes of the Ulster Cycle is that of a "society in decline" (Gantz 1981:25). This is emphasized by the tradition of the destruction of *Emain* and the (seemingly historical) contraction of *Ulaíd* east of the Newry valley.

The portrayal of the *Ulaíd* and their fortunes in this manner seems most likely to have comprised part of the ideology of groups who had some type of relationship, contemporary or historical, with *Ulaíd*. The primary contender is probably *Airgialla*, a group of kingdoms which occupied territory adjacent to *Ulaíd* and are believed to have played a central role in curtailing the extent of *Ulaíd* territory in central and southern Ulster immediately prior to the early historic period, perhaps even overthrowing *Ulaíd* suzerainty (pp 172, 175-7). The epic literature may have been of particular significance within the ideology of one



kingdom, *Airthir*, within whose territory Navan Fort was located. The possible incorporation of the episodes of the Ulster Cycle within the ideology of *Airthir* may have had a combined function. Firstly, emphasizing the perceived (former) status of Navan Fort as the royal capital of *Ulaíd* may constitute a reference to the defeat and expulsion of *Ulaíd* by the *Airgialla* and thus an expression of the independence of *Airthir* (and *Airgialla* in general). Secondly, by portraying Navan Fort as the residence of the kings and heroes of *Ulaíd* and an immemorial seat of royal authority, the kings of *Airthir* would have been investing meaning and value in a monument which now lay within their territory. They may then have associated themselves with it by means of activities such as the *Óenach*. In this manner, kings of *Airthir* may have been seeking to cast themselves as the legitimate inheritors of a royal authority which was formerly of considerable extent and which, because of its immemorial quality, was perceived to be invested with a mystic aura and therefore unchallengeable.

Indeed, a Medieval analogy to the postulated appropriation of Navan Fort by the kings of *Airthir* may be cited. In his register (fol 1v; ed Lawlor 1911), Milo Sweteman, Archbishop of Armagh, records on 6 August 1374 that Niall Mor, the Great Ó Neill of *Tír Eóghain* (Tyrone), "... with sacriligious and diabolic presumption, has been publicly threatening, and threatens daily, that he wishes to make his manor or longphort (*manerium sive lanfordum suum*) at Hewynna [ie *Emain Macha*] near Armagh, which was and is our land, and that of blessed Patrick" (trans Simms 1983:142). His son evidently regarded Navan Fort with some importance as well, because "a house was built in Emain Macha by Niall Og Ó Neill to recompense the (learned) companies of Ireland therein" (AU

sa 1387; trans MacCarthy 1895:19). Simms (1983) associates these events with the O'Neill appropriation of the title *rí Uladh* and its application not to the early historic over-kingship of that name, but to the entirety of northern Ireland, the extent of the (alleged) ancient *cóiced* of *Ulaíd*. Through their association with Navan Fort, and, presumably with the help of the poets entertained there, the Ó Neills appear to have been attempting to demonstrate the legitimacy of their new title and their power within northern Ireland with reference to the past - the status of *Emain Macha* as capital of *Ulaíd* and that of its occupants as kings of an *Ulaíd* comprising all northern Ireland.

This is the secular dimension of the ideological significance of Navan Fort and the episodes of the Ulster Cycle. That there is also an ecclesiastical dimension is suggested by the spatial proximity of Navan Fort and the Church of Armagh, and by the apparent involvement of the Church - as controller of the knowledge and materials of literacy - in the composition and transmission of the episodes of the Ulster Cycle. More definitely, the deliberate antithesis of Armagh and *Emain Macha* in some sources is indicative of ecclesiastical involvement. The motives here may be two-fold. The composition and transmission of epic literature which concerned a kingdom whose power, in the Armagh area at least, had been eclipsed, may be interpreted as celebrating the downfall of vainglorious and arrogant (pagan?) kings, in contrast to the Church's increasing power. It is possible, however, that there is also a secular involvement here, and it may be noted that members of the ruling line within *Airthir* appear to have held some of the more important ecclesiastical offices at Armagh. If Armagh had any involvement in the composition and/or transmission of the tales of the Ulster Cycle - and



this is possible but unproven - it is conceivable that both secular and ecclesiastical interests could have been advanced in the same manner and through the same medium, being differentiated primarily by the contexts and modes of performance.

The reappraisal of the political contexts of both Navan Fort and of the Ulster Cycle epic literature is a large and complex matter. This chapter has sought to demonstrate the manner in which the ideological significance of both the monument and the literature in which it is portrayed are interlinked. It should also give an indication of the nature and extent of ecclesiastical involvement in the investment of ideological meaning in monuments and the construction of the past. This theme will be further explored, with specific reference to Armagh, in part two.

**PART TWO**

**MONUMENTS AND RITUAL AUTHORITY:**

**A CASE STUDY OF ARMAGH**



CHAPTER FOUR  
THE ECCLESIASTICAL TOPOGRAPHY  
OF EARLY HISTORIC ARMAGH

A significant development in the archaeology of early historic ecclesiastical sites in Ireland has occurred in recent years. This is the realization that these sites share certain common features in their constituent elements and layout, and that these reflect shared religious beliefs and practices. Indeed, this may be assumed. Ritual is a highly formalized, structured and repetitive activity (Leach 1966:404; Goody 1977:30-1). Early Christian ritual - the liturgy - appears to have been associated with physical foci, perhaps initially cross-slabs and altar shrines, and then oratories, churches and ecclesiastical enclosures (Thomas 1971:138-9,168). This may be expected to have engendered formalized and consistently recurring relationships between the different structural elements which commonly occur on ecclesiastical sites.

Until recently, however, it was widely believed that the layout of ecclesiastical settlements was arbitrary and amorphous: "Within the enclosure of the monastery, all sorts of buildings were scattered, *probably without much order*, one or two stone churches being surrounded by wooden buildings of various shapes" (Henry 1965:91; *emphasis mine*).

Not only was the disposition of ecclesiastical buildings unstructured, but their relationships - cognitive as well as spatial - were perceived to be meaningless: "The most conspicuous buildings [at Monasterboice, Co Louth]... of which any relics remain, are the churches... of these there were several, scattered over the area of the monastic enclosure. The monastic settlements at Clonmacnoise and Glendalough have each a number of small churches, obviously of very different dates and *not designed to carry out any uniform symbolic or other scheme*" (Macalister 1946:16; emphasis mine).

The former prevalence of such attitudes may have resulted from the great variety of character, location and size which Irish early ecclesiastical sites exhibit and the varying extents to which they have been altered by later ecclesiastical buildings. For instance, it may be difficult to determine what, if anything, the monastic settlement on the craggy island of Skellig Michael, off the coast of Co Kerry (de Paor 1955; Norman and St Joseph 1969:95, pl 53), could have held in common with the contemporaneous one of Clonmacnoise, Co Offaly, in a bend in the River Shannon (Westropp 1907; Norman and St Joseph 1969:119, pl 70). Indeed, many, if not most, ecclesiastical sites of the early historic period were smaller than either of these, perhaps consisting of only a small oratory and a couple of cells, perhaps within a small earthwork or drystone enclosure, if even that (eg the examples in Henry 1957).

Despite the great number and considerable variety of ecclesiastical sites, some common traits had already been isolated, especially amongst local distributions. Henry (1957:154-6), in her survey of the early ecclesiastical sites of the Iveragh peninsula, Co Kerry, identified the recurring association of the oratory, cross-slab, and saint's or



founder's tomb, all within an enclosure. In her analogy between this and the *martyria*, "... those small funerary chapels erected over the tomb of a martyr and later of some revered dead", Henry (1957:155) implies the existence of two important phenomena. These are, firstly, that some early ecclesiastical sites both within and beyond Ireland *do* appear to possess a common physical and spiritual focus, and secondly, that that focus was a repository of saints' relics and possibly also the tomb of the church's founder. It is perhaps within such a context that one may detect the investment of meaning and value in monuments - small slab-tombs in this case - and the construction of the past within an ecclesiastical context.

One manifestation of this may be the proliferation of allegedly early annalistic entries which purport to record the founding of a church by a saint, or the death of a saint who founded a specific church, such as that of St Erc, alleged founder and bishop of Slane, Co Meath (AU sa 512; trans MacAirt and MacNiocaill 1983:63): "Repose of Erc, bishop of Slane" (cf ACIon sa 509 and AI sa 512). However, many of these entries are allegedly so early that they antedate the advent of contemporary historical recording in the annals (pp 39-45). As a result, the "... dates of saints who died before 549 are very likely to be inaccurate... [with] the possibility of an accurate record... after 550, and that by the seventh century the obits are likely to be correct on the whole" (Hughes 1966:67). At least some of those entries which allegedly antedate the mid-sixth century, therefore, are probably retrospective in nature and may deliberately seek to demonstrate the antiquity of these churches. The motive behind this will be discussed below (pp 347-8).

It is only recently that the existence of common elements within the plans of early ecclesiastical foundations has been addressed. This has been instigated primarily by Michael Herity who, following his survey of the early ecclesiastical site of High Island, Co Galway (1977), has gone on to look more widely at the morphology of early ecclesiastical sites (1983b; 1984b). He concludes that "Excavation of a number of sites in the west [of Ireland] suggests that the three focal monuments [cross-slab, saint's tomb and rectangular oratory] and the burials are arranged in a *recurring standard plan* somewhat apart from the domestic buildings of the hermitage or monastery" (Herity 1984b:106; emphasis mine). That is, a spatial organization and distinction between sacred and profane elements is evident within early ecclesiastical sites. Some of the larger foundations, such as Clonmacnoise, are claimed to exhibit a "dispersed arrangement" (ibid:107-8). However, they appear to be dispersed only in the sense that their constituent elements occupy a larger area. They still exhibit planning, as revealed by their possession of a focus and the common disposition of certain buildings and sculptured stones, including, by the late first millennium AD, stone churches, high crosses and round towers (ibid:108).

The date at which common features in the planning of ecclesiastical sites were adopted or emerged is unclear. Swan (1985:100) states that the planned form detectable amongst the ecclesiastical sites which he considers must have originated "... well before the end of the eleventh century". Herity (1983b) concentrates on the layout of monastic settlements within the period AD 800 to 1000, while Doherty (1985:60) claims that "... by c 800 the basic model had been established". In many cases, however, the elements of an ecclesiastical site which exhibit planning,



such as round towers and high crosses, belong to the late first millennium. These features cannot attest the initial planning of the site. Rather, it must be considered either that these later features were incorporated within a pre-existing plan, the earlier elements of which no longer survive, or that successive phases of rebuilding within the site enabled an element of planning to be introduced.

The prevalence of this form of spatial organization is suggested by Swan's (1985) study of twelve larger ecclesiastical settlements, primarily within eastern Ireland and the central midlands. Using information derived from aerial reconnaissance and photography and cartographic study, Swan makes a preliminary assessment of the morphological similarities of these sites. He isolates a range of common features, principally in the structured spatial relationships of the buildings and high crosses, but stops short of assessing the significance of these patterns.

The chapters of part two seek to demonstrate the possible ideological significance of the spatial organization of early historic ecclesiastical settlements in the form of a case study of Armagh. This is concerned with some of the structural elements of early historic Armagh as monuments - physical manifestations of, or referents to, a past which was invested with meaning and value. In doing so, it seeks to examine the possible role of such monuments, and that of the ecclesiastical settlement as a whole, in the construction of a past which is of ideological significance. The objective of this is to assess whether the monuments and buildings of Armagh played any role in the community's efforts to achieve ecclesiastical primacy within Ireland.

This aspiration is vigorously pursued in Armagh's hagiographical writings (Sharpe 1982; 1984a).

This, therefore, concerns monuments and the construction of the past within an ecclesiastical context and follows the penultimate section of chapter three, in which the ideological significance of Navan Fort within the context of structures of ecclesiastical authority was considered (pp 186-99). However, the use of monuments and the construction of the past which is explored in this and, principally, the following chapter exhibit a scale and a complexity which does not appear to be evident in the investment of ideological significance within a secular context. The veracity of this observation and its possible implications are considered below (pp 367-8).

Indeed, the complexity, not only of the ideological dimension of monuments and the construction of the past in early historic Armagh, but also of the relevant evidence, necessitates the devotion of two chapters. The present chapter seeks to elucidate Armagh's topography during the early historic period, including the location of the external boundaries, internal sub-divisions, high crosses, churches and other buildings and foci of Christian ritual activity. This constitutes the physical background to the following chapter and is an attempt to collate and appraise the empirical evidence which will be marshalled in the case presented in chapter five. A detailed analysis is required because, although the outline topography of early historic Armagh may be fossilized within the street-plan of the modern city (pp 249-88), its form, and certainly significance, are not immediately apparent.

The next chapter will examine the symbolic significance, both within a ritual and a political context, of Armagh's morphology against



the background of ecclesiastical politics of the early historic period. This offers the potential not only of a greater understanding of the layout of one the major ecclesiastical centres of the period and, possibly, of the rituals associated with it, but also of one of the central themes of early Irish history - Armagh's claim of ecclesiastical primacy - as well as the more general involvement of the Church in the construction of the past.

It is not intended that this chapter should consider the theme of the incipient urbanization which may be associated with the larger ecclesiastical settlements. This would require a much wider study, taking into account ecclesiastical sites throughout Ireland. This subject has recently received some attention (Butlin 1977; Simms 1983; Jager 1984; Doherty 1985; Bradley 1987), and it is notable that Swan (1985), in his survey of twelve larger ecclesiastical sites, terms them "proto-towns". In addition, it may be noted that Armagh is frequently referred to as an *urbs* in *Liber angeli* ("The Book of the Angel"), a treatise which "... claims that Patrick had been invested with the supremacy of the Irish Church and that his successors were to retain this position" (Richter 1988:97). This source dates to the mid-seventh century AD (p 346). The motive behind accrediting Armagh with the status of an *urbs* appears to have been to associate, even equate, Armagh with Rome, the papal see, as a means of furthering its own aspirations of ecclesiastical primacy in Ireland (Sharpe 1984a:70; pp 336, 34-7, below. Sharpe's "all early medieval texts" refers to *Irish* examples):

Having the relics of Roman martyrs and claiming primatial rights, Armagh proceeded to identify itself with Rome. This shows itself in the terminology of the *Liber Angeli*... in the repeated use of the word *urbs*. In all early medieval texts, *urbs* means pre-eminently Rome, the *caput urbium*. Yet it is applied to Armagh no fewer than five times.

In contrast, it may be noted that "Adomnan uses *civitas* only of a Roman city and of Rome itself" (MacDonald 1984:278). Not only this, but the *Annals of Ulster* (sa 444) specifically links Armagh and Rome by synchronizing Armagh's foundation with that of Rome through the recording of its date of foundation in the form *ab urbe condita* (trans MacAirt and MacNiocaill 1983:43): "AD 444. Ard Macha was founded. From the building of the city (*ab urbe condita*) [of Rome] to the foundation of this city 1194 [years]".

The chapters of part two vary from the rest of this study in that they do not focus on a monument or group of monuments in the manner followed in previous chapters. However, there are senses in which a major ecclesiastical settlement may be considered as a monument. Like all urban settlements, early historic Armagh may be said to be characterized by the past. This is evident from the mythology and hagiography relating to its foundation and in the possible rituals which may have commemorated this (pp 187-94, 293-305, 362-9). This concern with the past is also expressed in Patrician hagiographical literature and in the dedications of churches and high crosses within Armagh, all of which may have played an important part in the advance-ment of Armagh's claim of primacy (pp 342-68). In short, they constitute constructions of the past which were employed for ideological reasons. In addition to this, the location of the Church of Armagh may have been influenced by either the Iron Age enclosure on the summit of Cathedral Hill (on which see pp 241-41) and/or the spatial proximity of Navan Fort (pp 186-93). Indeed, early historic Armagh lay in a landscape dominated by the past, both monumental and mythological.



## The Nature of the Evidence

The most serious problem confronting any study of early historic Armagh is the almost complete absence of any visible remains of the period. "All that survives are the high cross which now stands, in fragments, in the north aisle of St Patrick's Church of Ireland Cathedral (hereafter referred to as "the cathedral") and a fragment of another to the south-west of the cathedral (pp 269-70, 308). Both date to the ninth or early tenth centuries (Henry 1967:42). The cathedral itself dates from 1266 (AU sa 1266; trans MacCarthy 1893:341), "The larger church (*ecclesia maior*) of St Patrick in the city of Ard-Macha within the wall was commenced by the archbishop of Ard-Macha, namely Máel-Padraig Ua Sgannail". However, it has, over the centuries, been burnt (both deliberately and by accident) and plundered on many occasions (Paterson and Davies 1940b:84-7; Lucas 1967:215; Brown and Harper 1985: 110). To compound matters, "... in 1834 began the so-called restoration by Archbishop Lord John George Beresford. His architect, the eminent Cottingham, succeeded in totally destroying the ancient character of the cathedral and in scattering much of the older work, some of which went to London, whilst other portions were given to local people who desired carved stones for their gardens" (Paterson and Davies 1940b:87). Cottingham also removed the spire and "... the very beautiful west doorway with its richly moulded and cusped arch, canopied niches and pinnacles..." (Cathedral nd:9). A solid stone screen was erected between the choir and nave, although this was removed in 1888 and re-erected between the regimental chapel and the choir vestry in the south transept. As a result of these alterations, "Though the cathedral embodies substantially the walls of the medieval building, the

renovation of 1834 encased these in modern stone, and removed or concealed all details of antiquity, so that the present structure is of no value for the study of architecture earlier than the nineteenth century" (ibid:82). Even the official guide states bluntly that Cottingham's work "... unfortunately obliterated almost all traces of antiquity" (Cathedral nd:9). This may be viewed as the destruction and dispersal of the physical heritage of the Catholic Church, an event which immediately preceded the foundation of St Patrick's Catholic Cathedral in Armagh, construction of which began in 1840.

Indeed, one can sympathize with Dean Reeves' (1860:2) opening remarks to the Armagh Natural History and Philosophy Society, when he stated, "I am not acquainted with any place in this island, so rich in historical associations, and yet having so little to show, and so little to tell, at the present day, as Armagh". However, excavation on the summit of Cathedral Hill may yield evidence of early historic period activity, possibly even including structural remains. Hamlin (1984:126) notes that "Churches are often badly disturbed by burials, and recent burial can offer a formidable barrier to archaeological excavation". Despite this, it seems realistic to assume that some features, especially those cut into the hillside, and their associated deposits, may have survived to some extent, as excavation already indicates (Brown and Harper 1985; pp 221-49).

These problems, of course, are not unique to Armagh but affect many ecclesiastical sites with long histories of activity. However, Armagh has suffered particularly badly for two reasons. Firstly, the site of the ecclesiastical settlement lies at the centre of a Medieval and modern city, unlike, for example, Clonmacnoise. Secondly, that city was



destroyed numerous times in the wars between the Irish and the English up until the mid-seventeenth century. This has ensured the survival of very little in the way of upstanding ecclesiastical buildings, while the reconstruction which this is likely to have necessitated may have destroyed a considerable proportion of the archaeological evidence relating to earlier structures.

Nevertheless, the topography of the modern city is believed to preserve within it the boundaries of the ecclesiastical settlement, fossilized within the contemporary street-plan of the city: "... the later streets of the primatial city preserve the plan of the original monastic enclosure... Today the cathedral stands at the centre of a town which - as the vertical photograph of the city shows - appears to have retained the original circular shape of the monastic enclosure" (Norman and St Joseph 1969:117). The streets concerned appear to describe two roughly concentric circles and their course is described below (pp 249-71; reference should be made to figs 11, 12 and 13 throughout this and the following chapter). However, it should be emphasized that there is no unequivocal evidence that these streets do preserve the course of the early ecclesiastical boundaries. This has not been tested by excavation and, given the impracticalities of excavating the streets of a modern city, it is unlikely to be. The only excavations to have been undertaken on Cathedral Hill to date revealed a length of ditch, apparently belonging to a hill-top enclosure. However, the ditch does not coincide with any of the possible boundaries which may be preserved in the city's modern street-plan. This ditch, therefore, is of uncertain relevance to the ecclesiastical settlement, but is nevertheless of potential importance to the study of the origins of early historic Armagh (pp 186-93,

221,255-6). As this is a complex and important feature, but one which is of uncertain date, the following section will be devoted to its analysis and interpretation. Having established the relationship - if any - of this ditch to the ecclesiastical boundaries the form and extent of the ecclesiastical enclosures may then be considered.

The literary sources relevant to the study of the topography of early historic Armagh fall into three categories. These are annalistic entries, hagiographical literature, and sixteenth and seventeenth century papers of the English, and latterly British, Crown. The annals are the most useful of these. In particular, the *Annals of Ulster* contains several entries relating to the churches, other ecclesiastical buildings, topography and spatial organization of Armagh. However, the first record of an ecclesiastical building within Armagh is not until the late eighth century (AU sa 788; trans MacAirt and MacNiocaill 1983: 244-5): "A quarrel in Ard Macha, in which a man was killed in front of the stone oratory (*in hostio oratorii lapidei*)". This contrasts with the mid-seventh century *Liber angeli* (S15-6; ed Bieler 1979:186; pp 260,356, below), which mentions an *aeclessia* and a *bassilica*, terms which are perhaps suggestive of larger buildings of worship.

The first reference to an internal division is not until the early eleventh century (AU sa 1008; quoted on p 281, below). This need not imply that such divisions did not exist before that date, rather that their first appearance in the annals is the product of specific historical conditions. Prior to the eleventh century, the topographical information relating to Armagh which is contained in the annals is sparse. However, not only does this improve dramatically during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when annalistic entries in general



become more detailed, but places within the ecclesiastical settlement are referred to without it being stated that they are in Armagh (eg AU sa 1121: trans MacAirt and MacNiocaill 1983:567), "Two stretches of Trian Masan, from the gate of the *ráith* (*dhorus Ratha*) to the cross of Brigit (*crois m-Brigte*), were burned". (In this particular case, however, the following entry also concerns Armagh, which is named). This assumes a reasonable degree of knowledge of Armagh, and perhaps implies that the *Annals of Ulster* was compiled in Armagh during this period, or at least by chroniclers who were familiar with the city and who assumed that it would be realized that these entries referred to Armagh.

On the basis of the annalistic evidence, therefore, there is no reason to believe that the internal divisions did not exist before sa 1008, just as no-one would seriously doubt the existence of religious buildings in Armagh prior to their first appearance in the annals sa 788. The use of later annalistic sources, some of which are as late as the mid-twelfth century, may be justified on the grounds that the information which is sought is primarily topographical. Innate conservatism appears to be inherent in the location and form of many religious sites and, in the context of early historic Armagh, also seems to apply to the course of the ecclesiastical boundaries. Given this, it seems probable that the locations of the churches and other features, as they were recorded at the end of the early historic period, may be assumed to be their original sites. In some cases this may be supported by the references to certain churches in the *Liber angeli* and, overall, by the cosmological scheme which the layout of the ecclesiastical settlement appears to embody (pp 341-3).

As the annalistic entries employed in this chapter date to between the late eighth and mid-twelfth centuries, these sources fall within the period of the contemporary annalistic recording of events and therefore may be regarded as reliable historical sources (pp 39-45). This would seem to be particularly true of the topographical information pertaining to Armagh, most of which is mentioned only incidentally. A more circum-spect approach may be necessitated by the hagiographical sources, however. In the case of Armagh, the relevant sources are the *Liber angeli* (ed and trans Bieler 1979:184-91) and the *Vita tripartita* (ed and trans Stokes 1887), written between 895 and 901. Not only are these works mythological in nature, but they are also overtly ideological in character, seeking to portray the activities of St Patrick in a certain manner in order to further Armagh's claim of ecclesiastical primacy (pp 345-7). The hagiographical sources provide important information concerning the topography of the ecclesiastical settlement, but should be treated with caution, partly because they are set in the past but also as a result of their ideological qualities. However, the occurrence of topographical information as incidental detail in these sources may suggest this to be fairly reliable evidence.

There are three principal cartographic sources which are of value for studying the topography of Medieval Armagh. The earliest of these is Richard Bartlett's conjoined map of "Armagh and the 3rd Blackwater Fort" (reproduced in Hayes-McCoy 1964:6-7, pl 3; fig 14, below), which was made after July 1601, probably in 1602. This is a bird's eye pictorial view of Armagh and its environs, from the east. It depicts the city after its attack and capture by the English under Lord Deputy Mountjoy, with its churches and cathedral in ruins and, with only a few



exceptions, only the foundations of what appear to have been timber or wattle houses surviving. This source is extremely valuable because it indicates the locations of several churches within Armagh which may be identified with ecclesiastical foundations of the early historic period, thus apparently providing a direct correlation between the city as portrayed in the map and the topography of early historic Armagh. The map also depicts *Tempull na Ferta*, within its enclosure, allegedly St Patrick's first foundation in Armagh, before he was given Cathedral Hill (on which see pp 192,271-6), and the cathedral, with a high cross standing outside the eastern entrance to the cathedral's enclosure (pp 252-3,318-9). A potential problem in using this source is that it is of uncertain accuracy and it is possible that it contains inaccuracies introduced by artistic licence, the limitations of the cartographer's artistic skills or as a result of drawing from memory. It may be noted, however, that the locations of the churches and high cross depicted by Bartlett appear to correspond with those that may be inferred from the annals and more recent cartographic sources, thereby suggesting the reliability of this map (though see pp 253,267-8).

These more recent maps are by Rocque (1760) and Livingstone (1767), both of which are in a more modern cartographic form. As a result, they contain more readily comprehensible information about the locations and boundaries of the presumed internal divisions and the extents of the former ecclesiastical enclosures than does Bartlett's map. The eighteenth century maps also depict the remains of some of the churches within the city and mark the sites of others. The relevant information from these sources is conveniently incorporated in the map in Reeves's (1860) study (fig 11).

The last group of literary sources need only be mentioned in passing. These are the English, and latterly British, Crown papers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which provide a limited amount of information concerning the topography of, and location of churches within, Armagh. These sources include communications between English administrators and generals in Ireland and the crown, and inquisitions held during the reign of James I (1603-25) to determine the ownership of lands and properties formerly held by the then dissolved monastic houses. Some relevant information from these is cited by Reeves (1860).

The final source of information relating to the topography of early historic Armagh is probably the one with perhaps the greatest unexploited potential, archaeological excavation. It was remarked above (pp 191, 214) that little in the way of upstanding remains are likely to found during excavation, as a result of the nature, extent and duration of human activity on Cathedral Hill. However, this does not preclude the possibility of finding "negative" features, those which have been cut into the hillside, or, perhaps, isolated areas of undisturbed deposits. The former point is demonstrated by the results of limited excavations conducted on the southern side of Cathedral Hill (Brown and Harper 1985). Although this was a small-scale operation, it was highly productive, revealing a large ditch, several less well-preserved features, and much artefactual material of the early historic period. It should be noted, however, that excavation rarely provides straightforward answers, especially when it is of limited extent and conducted on a complex and poorly-preserved site. In many cases, excavation poses new problems rather than solves existing ones. This is why the following



section is devoted to an analysis of the results of excavation of the Cathedral Hill ditch.

Despite this, there seems little doubt that a concerted campaign of excavation, opening derelict plots of land on and around Cathedral Hill, may greatly increase the evidence relating to, and hopefully the understanding of, late Iron Age and early historic Armagh. Indeed, excavation need not be confined to Cathedral Hill. St Patrick's alleged first church at Armagh, *Tempull na Ferta*, was not on Cathedral Hill at all, but lay a short distance to the east, beyond the presumed area of the outer ecclesiastical boundary, where small-scale excavation has revealed the presence of an early cemetery (Lynn 1977b:24-5; Lynn and McDowell 1988a:58-61; McDowell 1986; 1987; pp 271-6, below).

#### The Excavated Ditch on Cathedral Hill

The only excavation to have been undertaken on Cathedral Hill to date is that conducted by Brown and Harper in 1968 (Brown and Harper 1985). This was located on the south-eastern shoulder of Cathedral Hill, between the boundary wall of the graveyard of St Patrick's Cathedral and Castle Street, which is thought to fossilize the line of one of the enclosure boundaries of the early ecclesiastical settlement (figs 13 and 15; pp 249-53). Excavation uncovered a length of a substantial ditch, which may belong to a hill-top enclosure. The nature and date of construction and infilling of this ditch are of potential importance to the study of the early occupation of Cathedral Hill and in determining the relationship of the modern street-plan to the early ecclesiastical boundaries. For example, if the ditch can be demonstrated to belong to one of the early historic ecclesiastical boundaries then this undermines

the widely-accepted view that these boundaries are fossilized within the morphology of the post-Medieval city (pp 248-71). However, the excavated evidence is complex and the dating potentially ambiguous. An informed appreciation of the results and significance of the excavation is not aided by the disjointed nature of the excavation report and the terseness of the interpretation which it offers. For these reasons the present section attempts a critical review of the nature, date and significance of the ditch.

Three sections of the ditch were excavated. These revealed it to have been "... originally about 6.4 m wide at the top, V-shaped in section..." (Brown and Harper 1985:112) and between 2.3 m and 3 m deep (frequent reference should be made to figs 16 and 17 throughout this discussion). The only internal features recorded include "... a rough stone revetment and a substantial circular post-hole on the N side of the ditch bottom... and the remains of three wooden stakes driven into the ditch bottom..." (ibid:112). These features appear to be contemporary with the ditch but as the revetment was detected in only one section (trench 1) and the stakes only in another (trench 3), it is unclear whether these represent anything more than localized features. Their presence does not appear to support or exclude a specific function for the ditch.

Three principal phases of deposits are represented in the ditch fills. The first phase comprises the initial silting within the ditch. A primary silting of red-brown sand and clays occurs in trenches 2 (layers 12 and 13) and 3 (layer 17) (ibid:112). This appears to be typical of the type of deposit which accumulates rapidly in the base of a ditch as a result of erosion of the freshly-exposed ditch sides (on which see



Limbrey 1975:292; Barker 1977:221; Reynolds 1979:106-8). The primary silting yielded cattle and pig bones (ibid:112) and, from trench 2, "... 13 fragments of [human] skull, a left hemi-mandible, and four loose teeth" (Rees-Jones 1985:154).

The secondary silting comprises a charcoal-rich loam (trench 1, layer 8; trench 2, layer 11; trench 3, layer 16) which, in trench 1, directly overlies the subsoil and boulder revetment and filled the post-hole mentioned above (p 222). Finds include an iron knife, lumps of iron slag, a crucible fragment (Brown and Harper 1985:146, no 127), and cattle, pig, sheep and deer bones (ibid:112). Human skeletal remains from trench 1 include fragments of a skull, two femurs and a tibia (Rees-Jones 1985:151). Samples from small uncarbonized twigs in trench 3, layer 16, produced a carbon-14 date of  $1660 \pm 80$  bp (UB-283; Brown and Harper 1985:112,156).

Phase two comprises layers which appear be associated with the deliberate infilling of the ditch (ibid:112):

The active use of the ditch as a protective enclosure appears to have been brought to an end when material from an outer bank was pushed back into the ditch. A substantial deposit of red stony clay appeared in all three of the ditch sections, with tip-lines indicating that it had derived from the S [ie outer] side of the ditch.

Although evidence is limited to the small area excavated, this may represent a major reorganization of, or hiatus in, activity on the hill-top, perhaps including the complete destruction of the enclosure to which the ditch may have belonged.

These deposits (trench 1, layer 7; trench 2, layers 10 and 12; trench 3, layers 14 and 14a) are, on average, 1.75 m deep and comprise the bulk of the ditch fill. Trench 3, layer 15, which was sandwiched between layers 14 and 14a, contained an articulated human skeleton and a

skull. The skeleton, that of a male aged about thirty (Rees-Jones 1985: 151,154), may have been interred within a charcoal-lined pit which had been cut through, apparently from the surface of, the stony red clay of layer 14 (Brown and Harper 1985:112,114). It was an extended inhumation, orientated north-south, with the skeleton lying on its back on the southern slope of the partially-filled ditch (ibid:114). The skull therefore lay at a pronouncedly lower level than the feet, contrary to the impression created by plate 3 (ibid:121), which has been reproduced on its side (cf ibid:115, pl 2). This layer also yielded the skull of a female of about 40 years of age (Rees-Jones 1985:151). Layers 15 and 15a produced an iron knife, crucible fragments, stone ingot moulds, scrap bronze and animal bone. The layer above the inhumation, layer 14, yielded a crucible, while the equivalent level in trench 2, layer 10, produced pieces of slag (Brown and Harper 1985:114).

Phase three comprises features and deposits within the hollow of the largely infilled ditch. These include "... what may have been a localized re-cutting and silting-up of the ditch..." (Brown and Harper 1985:116). In trench 2 this shows as a V-sectioned cut, filled with a charcoal-rich clay (layer 11a) and a clay with some charcoal (layer 9). This fill is, in turn, cut by another trench, whose fill comprises layer 7. The possible ritual significance of re-cut ditches is discussed in chapter five (p 315). A charcoal-rich soil (trench 1, layers 5 and 6; trench 2, layer 5) which overlies these ditch fills may represent a turfline. Trench 2, layer 5 yielded a possible shrine fitting of bronze (ibid:130, no 33, 133, pl 5a), and carbonized twigs which gave a carbon-14 date of  $1430 \pm 85$  bp (UB-285; ibid:116,157). Above this is a layer of clay and loam (layer 4), in which was found what is "Perhaps part of a



book fastening..." of bronze (ibid:130-2, no 35), a crucible fragment, and iron slag.

In trench 3, a layer of charcoal-rich loam had accumulated directly over the phase two ditch fill. This layer produced two iron knives, bronze wire and sheet, a pin mould, crucibles and crucible fragments and animal bone. It also yielded a carbon-14 date of  $1845 \pm 85$  bp (UB-284; Brown and Harper 1985:117). Above this layer, a stone causeway (layer 12) was built over the ditch hollow and above it a succession of layers (11a, 11, 10, 9a, 9, 8, 7, 6a, and 6) appear to be deposits tipped into the ditch hollow from the north. Several of these, especially layers 11 and 7, produced metalworking debris. The finds from layer 11 include a stone ingot mould, a bone knife handle, an iron knife, scrap bronze, a clay mould for a penannular brooch ring, a slate trial piece, crucible fragments, and a sherd of E ware (ibid:117).

In addition to this, "A number of layers in the upper levels of the ditch [fill] produced neither distinctive features nor finds... [and] must be assigned to an uncertain medieval or modern period" (Brown and Harper 1985:117). As these have little bearing on the nature and date of the ditch or its appearance during the early historic period, they will not be considered here. Similarly, the features excavated on either side of the ditch are too disturbed and/or modern in origin to warrant closer discussion. However, it is worth noting that these include structural features, primarily post-holes and stake-holes, and that some, in trenches 2 and 4, may belong to the remains of buildings (ibid:118-9). In addition, a nineteenth century feature, pit F, in trench 1, is worthy of mention because it contained a human skull (skull B), that of a male aged 60+, and a fragment of a humerus (ibid:120; Rees-Jones 1985:151),

both of which may have been redeposited (Brown and Harper 1985:120,157; p 233, below).

In the interpretation and dating of the ditch, the evidence of stratigraphy, small finds, and carbon-14 dates is paramount. One of these dates (UB-283), of  $1660 \pm 80$  bp, came from a sample of "... organic matter [layer 16] which accumulated in the ditch bottom just above the primary silting and, therefore, provides a good *terminus ante quem* for the construction of the ditch" (Brown and Harper 1985:156). However, given the uncertainty of what is actually being dated here - the deposition of wood fragments within an open ditch - it is difficult to share the excavators' optimism. Another carbon-14 date, from a later deposit in trench 3 (layer 13), gives what the excavators interpret as an *earlier* date,  $1845 \pm 85$  bp (UB-284). As the stratigraphy of the ditch shows no signs of disturbance, they treat this as anomalous: "... as it [the sample] was of charcoal rather than twigs it may well include heartwood 100-200 years older than the date of deposition" (ibid:156). Taking into account the degree of error in these dates, however, it may be noted that at two standard deviations there is an overlap between these two dates (p 227). This suggests both dates to be "valid", and possibly contemporary, but still reveals nothing about their relationship with the ditch. This example illustrates well the problem of placing too much emphasis on a limited number of carbon-14 dates.

The third carbon-14 date is from carbonized twigs from trench 2, layer 5. This layer appears to be alternatively described as "A charcoal-rich soil... [which] may represent a turfline" (Brown and Harper 1985:116) and a "... pit dug into the upper ditch fill" (ibid: 157). Its published appearance (reproduced here as fig 17) is more



consistent with the former interpretation. That the sample comprises small twigs rather than possibly older wood, and that it came from a layer which immediately overlay the deliberate ditch fill (layer 10), may suggest that it provides a reasonably accurate *terminus ante quem* for the infilling of the ditch. This date is  $1430 \pm 85$  bp (UB-285; *ibid*: 116,157). Again, however, one should be wary of what is actually being dated here and aware of the limitations of isolated carbon-14 dates.

These dates may be calibrated in order to take into account natural atmospheric variations in carbon-14 using Pearson and Baillie's (1983) calibration curve. This was produced by comparing high precision carbon-14 dates of Irish oaks preserved in peat bogs with dendrochronological dates of samples from the same material. Taking into account the error in the carbon-14 dates, at two standard deviations there should be a 95% probability that the "real", calendrical date falls within the calibrated range. At two standard deviations, the calibrated date ranges are (Brown and Harper 1985:156-7):

UB-283	$290 \pm 80$ ad	AD 130-600
UB-284	$105 \pm 85$ ad	AD 40-390
UB-285	$520 \pm 85$ ad	AD 430-790

These dates, therefore, do little to determine the central issue surrounding the date of the ditch, whether it belongs to an Iron Age or an early historic - and therefore presumably Christian - context. These terms are used in accordance with the distinction which is made above (pp 1-8). This is between a period which may be characterized by the existence of (albeit restricted) literacy, the emergence of the Church in an established position and an increasing trend towards political centralization (the early historic period), and the preceding Iron Age

or later prehistoric period. However, these processes did not suddenly arise, thereby creating a grey area within which it may be difficult to make meaningful distinctions.

The carbon-14 dates above may be consistent with the traditional date of St Patrick's alleged foundation of the Church of Armagh in the mid-fifth century (on which see pp 189-93). Equally, however, the dates may indicate that the construction of the ditch falls anytime within the preceding three centuries and that the ditch may have survived only as a shallow hollow at the alleged date of Armagh's foundation. On this evidence, therefore, the ditch may be part of the enclosure of an early ecclesiastical foundation or may attest Iron Age activity on Cathedral Hill. The stratigraphy of, and artefacts found in, the ditch fill may be considered in order to distinguish between these alternatives.

Artefacts from the lowest - phase one - levels of the ditch fill were few in number. The primary silting in all three trenches yielded no artefacts. The secondary silting in trenches 1 and 3 (layers 8 and 16 respectively) produced an iron knife and six lumps of slag in the former and a crucible in the latter. The artefactual material from the layers of phase two, the bulk of the ditch fill, is similar to that from the secondary silting layers. A bone knife handle and three pieces of slag were found in trench 2, layer 10, while trench 3, layer 14 yielded a crucible. The majority of artefactual finds are from the layers of phase three, the accumulation of deposits within the ditch hollow. These include a large amount of metalworking debris, principally crucible fragments, ingot moulds, bronze scrap and iron slag. The more notable finds include a possible shrine fitting (trench 2, layer 5), a bronze book fitting (trench 2, layer 4), a clay mould for a penannular brooch



ring and a sherd of E ware (both from trench 3, layer 11a) (Brown and Harper 1985:116-7 and *infra*). That "... three sherds forming crucible 110 came from layers (7), (11a) and (13), and the two sherds from crucible 113 came from layers (7) and (11)..." (ibid:117) may suggest either that these deposits accumulated fairly rapidly or else that the artefacts incorporated within the ditch fill were perhaps derived from another context and deposited over a period of time. During this phase, what had been the ditch appears to have become simply an eroding hollow which, without accompanying bank, did not function as a boundary.

It is only with phase three that the finds become culturally and chronologically diagnostic. The possible bronze shrine fitting (Brown and Harper 1985:130, no 33) is unparalleled and therefore not closely datable, but if its interpretation is correct, it would be consistent with an early historic ecclesiastical context. Other artefacts may be assigned an early historic date with greater confidence. These include the mould for a penannular brooch ring (ibid:139, no 90), a characteristic form of early historic jewellery (Kilbride-Jones 1980; pp 149-52, above). More closely datable, however, is the sherd of E ware. This is the most common class of imported pottery in early historic Ireland, a strong, hard and gritty domestic ware in the form of cooking pots, jars, bowls, jugs, beakers and lids (Thomas 1981:20-5). Alcock and Alcock (1988:143) remark that "Class E pottery is found very widely on sites in both western Britain and Ireland, and its chronology, centred on the seventh and eighth centuries AD, is well established on the basis of site associations and radiocarbon dates. Despite this, neither the routes nor the mechanisms of its importation are well understood, nor has its continental source been established". Campbell (1984) provides a

cogent review of the arguments and evidence for the source of this pottery.

The combined evidence of these finds and the carbon-14 date of  $520 \pm 85$  ad (UB-285), from trench 2, layer 5 - the same context as the possible shrine fitting - indicates that the "... series of deposits and disturbances in the ditch hollow may be dated to the Early Christian period" (Brown and Harper 1985:116). Most of the finds from the layers belonging to phase three came from the same, or a similar, context (trench 1, layers 5 and 6; trench 2, layer 5; trench 3, layer 11). Of this, the excavators state that "A charcoal-rich soil, containing carbonised twigs, over this hollow [ie the partially infilled ditch] may represent a turfline" (ibid:116; repeated on p 117). The implication of the excavation report, although it is not stated explicitly, is that this possible turfline represents the ground level at the commencement of activity on the hill-top during the early historic period. If this is correct, then deposits of phases one and two, and the construction of the ditch itself, would appear to predate the early historic period. Indeed, in their interpretation of the carbon-14 dates, the excavators conclude that "This date range does allow the possibility that the ditch existed for some time before the traditional mid 5th-century date of St Patrick's arrival in Armagh and that the primary silting and its contents were of prehistoric date" (ibid:158). They then pose the question, "Could this ditch have originally surrounded Armagh's pagan Celtic sanctuary?" (ibid:159). The evidence, while not conclusive, is at least suggestive, and will now be reviewed.

In this context, it may be restated that the secondary ditch silting did yield some artefacts - iron knives, iron slag and a crucible



fragment (p 223). The phase two ditch fill also produced an iron knife, iron slag, scrap bronze, three stone ingot moulds and six crucible fragments (p 223-4). Iron knives, iron slag and crucible fragments were also recovered from phase three levels, the early historic metalworking debris in the hollow of the partially infilled ditch. This may imply that the phase 1 and 2 levels and, perhaps, the construction of the ditch itself, also belong to the early historic period. However, the volume of finds from these earlier contexts contrasts with that from the phase three levels. For instance, the phase one ditch fill yielded only a single crucible fragment, and the phase two fills six fragments and three complete examples, out of a total of sixty eight from the excavation as a whole. These contrasts may suggest at least that the nature of those activities practised within the vicinity of the ditch changed sometime after the phase two infilling. It may also be possible that the crucible fragments are intrusive, redeposited within a lower layer as a result of worm or rodent activity. More fundamentally, however, these artefacts cannot be dated closely enough to enable the contexts in which they occur to be dated with any confidence. While the crucibles (Brown and Harper 1985:146-7, nos 124 and 127), knife handle (ibid:128, no 126) and iron knife (ibid:128, no 14) may be paralleled with examples from the early historic royal site of Lagore, Co Meath (ibid:126,145), they are not sufficiently diagnostic for them to be attributed exclusively to the early historic period.

The evidence which points most persuasively to a prehistoric context for phases one and two of the ditch fill is the skeletal remains. The articulated skeleton found in layer 15, "... incorporated within the stony red clay of tr 3 layer (14)" (Brown and Harper 1985:

114) - the deliberately redeposited ditch infill, was orientated north-south, with its skull to the north. The skeleton lay sloping on the south side of the ditch, its skull resting on the lightly-silted ditch bottom. The context (the fill of a large ditch), orientation (north-south) and position (lying head-down on a slope) of this inhumation suggest that it was not a Christian one.

The excavators themselves comment that "... the mixture of finds in the overlying clay fill suggests a very casual non-Christian burial" (Brown and Harper 1985:112). These finds comprise crucibles, stone ingot moulds, a whetstone, scrap bronze and an iron knife. The excavators go on to state that "The circumstances of this burial... are rather curious, particularly as a further skull was found in the same layer close by, and another... came from pit F, tr 1.... Were these burials perhaps casual Viking interments?" (ibid:158). However, there is no reason to believe that this is a "casual" burial, whatever that may be. Firstly, of a thin layer of charcoal between layers 15 and 14a, the excavators say, "The feature beneath this body hints at a charcoal-lined pit" (ibid:112), which appears to be a grave. Secondly, the location, orientation and placing of the skeleton - "... *laid out* with the head turned to the right, the left arm straight down the left side, and the right arm folded across the body at waist level" (ibid:114; *emphasis mine*) - suggests this to have been a deliberate and careful, rather than a "casual", inhumation.

If this is, as the excavators suggest, a pagan burial, then the artefactual and carbon-14 dating evidence appears to preclude its interpretation as a Viking inhumation. The skeleton was stratified below layers containing a sherd of E ware, dating to the seventh or eighth



century (p 229), and yielding a carbon-14 date with a calibrated range of c AD 430 - 790 (p 227). Against this evidence, an Iron Age date for this burial seems more realistic. This may be supported by reference to the other skeletal remains from the ditch fill.

The excavations on Cathedral Hill yielded a range of other human skeletal material. A skull (skull C) was found in trench 3, layer 14, part of the phase two infill in which the articulated skeleton was found (Brown and Harper 1985:114). Another human skull (skull B) was recovered, together with a humerus, from trench 1, pit F (ibid:120). This feature is "... probably 19th century or later..." (ibid:120). However, the skull from the extended inhumation (skeleton D) "... has the same protruding supra-orbital ridges and low forehead as the skull B from tr 1, pit F" (Rees-Jones 1985:151), leading the excavators to conclude that "The family resemblance between the skulls strongly suggests a 19th-century disturbance and reburial of skull B" (Brown and Harper 1985:120). Other human skeletal remains found in a redeposited context include a clavicle, two left femurs and a fragment of pelvis from trench 4, pit E (Higgins 1985a:154), and possibly a fragment of ulna (Rees-Jones 1985:154, repeated on p 157) from trench 1, pit A (Brown and Harper 1985:119).

Other skeletal remains were recovered from the phase two ditch fill. Trench 2, layer 10 yielded a total of "13 fragments of skull, a left hemi-mandible, and four loose teeth" (Rees-Jones 1985:154). The phase one ditch levels were also productive, with human skeletal remains occurring in both the primary and secondary silting deposits. A skull fragment, two right femurs and a fragment of tibia were found in the secondary silting of trench 1, layer 8 (ibid:151), while "... fragments

of human bone..." (Brown and Harper 1985:112) are reported to have been found in the primary ditch silting (trench 2, layers 12 and 13; trench 3, layer 17) but are not mentioned in the specialist report. The volume of human skeletal remains from the layers of the phases one and two deposits, though not large, contrasts with that from the phase three levels, in the hollow of the infilled ditch. These deposits, which belong to the early historic period (pp 229-30), produced only a single fragment of tibia (trench 3, layer 10) (Higgins 1985a:154). Although detailed stratigraphical information is not given, this appears to contrast with the relative volumes of animal bones. As "... most of the [faunal] material (65%) was from the Early Christian era, with only 14% from the prehistoric... era" (Higgins 1985b:154), the greater proportion of human skeletal material from the phase one and two ditch deposits would appear not to be the product of differential preservation within levels of the ditch fill.

The human skeletal assemblage exhibits two distinctive traits. Firstly, there is a preponderance of skulls and long bones, including fragments. This suggests their deliberate selection. That their predominance is deliberate and not the result of factors such as the poorer preservation of smaller bones is indicated by the fact that much of this assemblage consists of fragments, rather than complete bones, and by the survival of small animal and even bird bones (Higgins 1985b). Secondly, most of the bones are in poor condition, although these, of course, may already have been ancient by the time they were deposited. Higgins (1985a:154) says of the bones found in trench 2, layer 10 (the phase two ditch fill) that "All the fragments except the teeth were heavily eroded". Skull C had its "Facial bones (except for part of maxilla) and



most of the base missing" (Rees-Jones 1985:151), although it should be noted that this skull is believed to have been disturbed and redeposited during the nineteenth century (pp 225-6).

This evidence suggests that, with the exception of skeleton D, the skeletal remains were deposited in the ditch in an already disarticulated and fragmentary state of attrition. These skeletal remains, therefore, were already stripped of their flesh before deposition. For example, four skulls, complete or fragmentary and excluding that from skeleton D, appear to have been found during excavation. However, only one fragment of a lower mandible was recovered from trench 2, layer 10) (Higgins 1985a), suggesting that the skulls were already fleshless - and therefore without their jawbones - before deposition.

This is suggestive either of the practice of excarnation, the stripping of flesh from a body as part of the mortuary ritual, or simply that this skeletal material had been disturbed and moved around over the years. This is a subject which has recently attracted attention as a result of the publication of the results of a carbon-14 dating project on skulls from the River Thames (Bradley and Gordon 1988), most of which proved to belong to the middle and late Bronze Age. That these skulls attest the practice of excarnation is criticized on the grounds that "From the anthropological point of view, it a pretty rare rite, and... there is no indisputable evidence that it was ever practised in prehistoric Britain" (Selkirk 1989). Bradley and Gordon (1989) state that "Excarnation is the stripping of flesh from a body - by primary burial, exposure or countless other means". Indeed, the practice of excarnation *does* appear to be attested in later prehistoric Britain. For instance, in a late Bronze Age occupation layer - belonging to a

settlement whose precise character is unknown - on the banks of the Thames below Wallingford, Oxfordshire, "The presence of human skull fragments suggests the disposal (or perhaps display) of human remains at or near the site" (Thomas et al 1986:195). This amounts to excarnation. Moreover, Wilson (1981:148) implies that excarnation was not an unusual mortuary practice in southern Britain during the pre-Roman Iron Age:

The fragmentary [human skeletal] material is most often cited as being the best direct evidence for exposure burial... Bone fragments may have many origins, exposure being only one, and... there are drawbacks to excarnation taking place within settlement areas. It does however seem to have occurred within at least two hillforts, Winklebury and Danebury, where the remains were exposed in pits... Buried or dumped bundles of fragmentary and disarticulated bones are also found on sites.

Wilson (1981:150) considers North American Indian parallels to be instructive in the study of deposits of Iron Age excarnated remains: "Loss of bone prior to secondary burial, intentional cultural selection of the most 'representative' bones (usually long bones), and differential decomposition were other factors accounting for variation in the material". Indeed, Wait (1985,1:120-1) sees excarnation as one of the Iron Age mortuary practises associated with "sacrificial victims", whose remains "... were probably exposed and disposed of without trace, except for the retention or manipulation of certain symbolically representative bones (mainly skulls and long bones of the right side of the body), which eventually were scattered and deposited in a wide variety of contexts". Strong evidence for the practice of excarnation also exists for the Neolithic period in southern Britain (Drewett 1977:224-6).

No Irish parallels to the Cathedral Hill deposits appear to exist, although the redeposition of skeletal remains is attested at one site. Cairn H at Loughcrew, Co Meath (IGR N 585775) (Conwell 1866a; 1866b; 1873; 1878; Raftery 1953; Evans 1966:170-2) appears to be a Neolithic



chambered tomb which was disturbed during the Iron Age, when large quantities of artefacts, mainly bone plaques (Raftery 1984:251-7), were deposited (on which see pp 376-7). One layer of the cairn's covering mound contained large quantities of crushed human bone, some of which had been burnt, and amongst which no individual burials or skeletons were identifiable. It is unclear whether this represents the redeposited contents of the tomb or Iron Age skeletal remains. Regardless of this, the layer of crushed bone appears to have been derived from another context and redeposited on the cairn. This may constitute a possible analogy to the deposition of excarnated skeletal remains within the ditch on Cathedral Hill. The Loughcrew example is of particular interest because it appears to constitute another example of the investment of significance in an earlier monument. That significance may have been expressed in the form of ritual activity, specifically mortuary practices and artefactual deposition, for which the monument constituted a focus.

Other possibly analogous deposits from later prehistoric contexts may be cited from nearer Armagh. For example, excavation at the King's Stables (IGR H 838455), in Tray townland, 3.5 km west of Cathedral Hill, revealed it to be an artificial pond in which large quantities of animal bone, articulated dog carcasses, and clay mould fragments from the manufacture of late Bronze Age leaf-shaped swords were deposited (Lynn 1977c; 1988a). Parts of a poorly preserved human skull were also found (Delaney, M. 1977:61):

Only the facial region, excluding the mandible, was represented .... There were many animal bones at the same level which were well-preserved and showed little sign of decay in marked contrast to the human skull. The fact that the skull is incomplete and in a very different state of preservation from neighbouring osseous material suggests that it was redeposited in that situation....

There is a suggestion from the (R) sphenoid bone that the facial portion may have been cut from the rest of the skull.

The excavator (Lynn 1977c:54-5) concludes that the evidence of the skull fragments "... argues against accidental mishap and supports the contention that the human remains represent a deliberate deposit".

Human skeletal remains are also recorded as having been found at the same time as the four Iron Age bronze horns from Loughnashade (IGR H 852454), in Navan and Drumcoote townlands, 2.3 km west of Cathedral Hill (Stuart 1819:608; see also p 4, above):

Near the trumpets were found human skulls and other bones, which, by the antiseptic quality of the bog, had been preserved uninjured, though their colour had been changed to a dusky brown... The teeth and other parts were in high preservation, but much of the skull is separable into distinct laminae, exceedingly thin, remarkably smooth, and retaining, like parchment, the impression of ink made with a pen.

None of the skeletal remains survives and it is therefore unclear whether their apparently poor general condition is a result of their immersion in the bog/loch or reflects the condition in which they were deposited. The relationship between the contexts from which the horns and the skulls were recovered - if any - is also unknown.

The deposits from both the King's Stables and Loughnashade are interpreted as being votive in character (Lynn 1977c:54-6 on the former; Herity and Eogan 1977:242; Raftery 1984:312,314; 1987:23-4 on the latter). Their importance, therefore, is that they attest the deposition of selected, and possibly exposed, human skeletal remains within ritual contexts in the vicinity of Armagh during later prehistory. This appears to constitute a parallel to the deposits within the Cathedral Hill ditch, although there is a considerable difference between deposits in pools/lochs and deposits in ditches. Those human remains in the Cathedral Hill ditch appear to have been incorporated in the secondary



silting and in the course of backfilling. The processes involved may be different but in both cases the skeletal material may be derived from a primary context. This contrasts with deposits in aquatic contexts which, although these also may be derived from primary contexts, presumably entered their context as a result of a single process, deliberate deposition. However, these contexts are analogous in that both appear to have been invested with special, ritual, significance during the late Bronze Age and Iron Age (see Alcock 1966; Ross 1967:20-33 on the ritual associations of aquatic contexts). Notably, Ross (1962) discusses the association - in archaeology and oral tradition - of severed heads with wells.

There is, however, an absence of close parallels to the Cathedral Hill deposits within Ireland, although similar examples are known from Britain and Gaul. Several instances of the deposition of human remains - though not necessarily excarnated or redeposited - are recorded from Iron Age sites in southern Britain. For example, Wilson (1981:141) records that, on settlements, "Adult inhumations in the EIA are extremely rare... but those which have been identified were deposited in perimeter ditches rather than locations within the settlement boundary". Some of these are interpreted as "foundation burials", which "... are assumed to be connected with the primary building or enlargement of hillfort ramparts or enclosure ditches. A similar interpretation is occasionally put forward for some animal burials..." (ibid:143,145).

Wilson (1981:146-7) and Wait (1985:94,98,117,120) note the widespread occurrence of single skulls and skull fragments on southern British sites of the Iron Age, primarily hillforts. In the light of Classical accounts of head-hunting by continental Celts (cited on p

164), they both regard this as possible evidence for the taking of heads as trophies (Wilson 1981:147; Wait 1985:119-20). However, Wilson (1981:147) suggests that such deposits may be the result, not of head-hunting, but of some sort of ritual activity. Certainly, the Celtic cult of the human head (on which see Lambrechts 1954; Ross 1958; 1967:61-126) was a powerful one, and one which consisted of more than simply head-hunting. A good example of a severed head from an Iron Age ditch is that from Stanwick, North Yorkshire, a massive complex of enclosures belonging to the first century AD. The skull, complete with mandible and four vertebrae - it evidently had not been exposed - had been severed from the neck and bore signs of apparently fatal sword wounds (Wheeler 1954:53-6). It lay a metre from, and in the same context as, a sword and scabbard (ibid:45), which is perhaps suggestive of a votive deposit. Small fragments of human skull were found in ditch sections elsewhere on the site (ibid:56).

It may be noted that the skeletal assemblage from the ditch on Cathedral Hill exhibits a preponderance of skulls and skull fragments, suggesting that the cult of the head may also be attested in these, possibly excarnated, deposits. This may also be evident in the occurrence of two carved stone heads from Cathedral Hill (Davies and Paterson 1940; Ross 1967:115, pls 39a,39b,40a. The latter is quoted on p 191, above ), although Rynne (1972: 80,94, n 15) casts doubt on the Iron Age dating of these sculptures, suggesting that they may belong to the early historic period. Although it is suggested above (pp 164-5) that decapitation, and possibly even the taking of heads as trophies, were practised into the early historic period, there appears to be no archaeological evidence - in the form of the presence of skulls on early



historic sites - of this. As the examples of the King's Stables and Loughnashade imply, however, human skulls may occur in late Bronze Age contexts and possibly in association with Iron Age metalwork (pp 236-8).

A site in north-eastern France perhaps provides a closer analogy to the Cathedral Hill skeletal deposits, and reveals the potential complexity of the processes surrounding the exposure and deposition of human and faunal remains. This evidence is worth citing in detail because of its richness and the insight it provides on a sequence of related ritual activities, of which only the fragmentary end product - having been subjected to various and lengthy processes of attrition - may be represented in the case of the Cathedral Hill deposits.

The rectilinear enclosure at Gournay-sur-Aronde, Oise, was occupied between the fourth century BC and the fourth century AD. During that period, over 2000 broken weapons, 3000 animal bones and large quantities of human bones were deposited in its enclosing ditch (Brunaux 1988:13-6). The distribution of skeletal remains within the ditch appears to have been deliberately patterned. Cattle skulls were placed in the ditch terminals, while sheep and pig bones were deposited in different parts of the ditch from human bones, and were separated by horse skeletons (ibid:9). The animals represented clearly had been killed in different and specific ways (ibid:120):

... cattle carcasses and horse skeletons were not marked with knives or any other carving instrument. On the other hand, scattered bones belonging to several well defined species do show numerous knife-marks. The former, unmarked, remains derive essentially from very aged cattle but the second are from very young lambs, pigs and some dogs.

The nature of these deposits indicates that parts of some carcasses were not deposited in the ditch (ibid:120). Rather, "... the victim... was divided between gods and man and consumed by the latter" (ibid:119).

After being slaughtered, those animals - or parts of animals - whose bones were destined to be deposited in the ditch were deliberately stripped of their flesh by natural processes, aided by human agency. This involved the temporary deposition of carcasses in a series of pits within the centre of the enclosure (Brunaux 1988:123-4; see also p 15): This took a long time - several months, perhaps six. It was necessary in effect for the animal to lose its flesh, and for this to seep into the earth in liquid form, in the same way as a libation....

When the joints could be parted, and only the spinal vertebrae were still linked, the carcass was pulled out.... At this point the remains were subjected to fresh rituals... the skulls were the object of a particular treatment... a sword blow to slice the muzzle, from which the lower jaw had already been removed. The skulls were then exposed or stored away somewhere.

The rest of the bones were treated in different ways.... divided into two groups - one destined to remain in the sanctuary and which was found in the ditch and another whose fate remains a mystery.... It is possible that the first lot of bones went through several intermediary stages before being put into the ditch. The depositions in the ditch on either side of the entrance pose less of a problem of interpretation. The bones of several cattle were carefully heaped together there. Between each deposition a decade or so elapsed: the bones that lay on the surface of the heaps were eaten into by an erosion which can only have occurred slowly in the atmosphere. Finally, between each phase of these heaps, skulls were interposed that had not been eroded, which indicates that they had been exposed under shelter before being deposited in the ditch, where they were immediately covered up.

It should be emphasized that this description concerns the treatment and deposition of animal bones within the ditch of an Iron Age enclosure in northern Gaul. However, there do appear to be some fundamental similarities between the skeletal assemblages from the ditch at Gournay and that at Cathedral Hill. Both comprised human and animal bones. The species represented at both sites were primarily cow, sheep/goat, pig, horse and dog. As at Gournay, the faunal assemblage from Cathedral Hill also exhibits signs of deliberate selection (Higgins 1985a:156):

... there was a higher than normal distribution of good meat bones (scapula, humerus, pelvis, femur, tibia), and a lower than normal distribution of metapodials, carpals, tarsals and phalanges, which



are waste products. This may well indicate that some primary butchery took place elsewhere. Whilst 69% of cow bones and 62% of large ribs and vertebrae showed definite butchery marks, there was no evidence that this was systematic. A small proportion of the bones had gnaw marks and this was particularly noticeable on the metapodials.

Rather than the location of butchery being off-site, this may be indicative of the deliberate selection of bones for deposition. That selection appears to have been for meat bones but although this may seem a utilitarian consideration, it may be postulated that the debris from feasting - which may have constituted part of some ritual practices - would result in a similar assemblage. However, more detailed analysis is not aided by the published faunal report (Higgins 1985a), which makes no distinction between the bones from different phases of the ditch fill.

Although an analogy may be made between the ditch deposits at Cathedral Hill and those at Gournay, the actual treatment of the animal and human bones appears to be reversed. While the human skeletal remains at Cathedral Hill may have been exposed (pp 234-6), those at Gournay were dismembered (Brunaux 1988:133-4):

Marks of cutting blows are in fact rare and are not the kind which are left on a living body by an execution or a sword fight. Instead, they are evidence of repeated blows that were delivered to a body stretched out and probably already dead, intended not to kill but to hack. Far more numerous are marks finely traced by the repeated and tentative passage of a knife blade turning around a joint and finally entering it. This was dismemberment as it was used upon animals, but perhaps with less skill; for humans possess some peculiarities, such as the shoulder blade, that pose an unexpected problem for an unskilled hand.

In contrast, the animal bones at Gournay were exposed (p 242), while those at Cathedral Hill had been butchered and their bones deposited.

Despite these differences and the much smaller sample of skeletal material from Cathedral Hill, there are perhaps enough general similarities to suggest something of the significance of the Cathedral Hill

deposits and their context. The composition of the deposits, including specifically human skulls and long bones, and their treatment - including excarnation and/or redeposition in the case of some human remains - suggests that they did not enter the ditch by chance. The bones, therefore, both human and animal, appear to have been deliberately selected - after excarnation in the case of the human ones - and deliberately deposited in the ditch, presumably as part of some mortuary ritual. The interpretation of this practice may rest on an analogy between the status of boundaries and that of dead ancestors (p 298). The nature of the skeletal deposits may corroborate the evidence of those allegedly pagan cult carvings from the cathedral graveyard, which have been used to infer that the hill-top was occupied by a pagan religious site (Ross 1967:115-6; Rynne 1972:80,82; pp 191,240, above). Alternatively, as boundaries, ditches themselves are of ritual status (pp 289-305,315) and therefore may be associated with ritual activity, although the sites that they enclose could conceivably have a more utilitarian function. The artefactual material from the phase one ditch deposits is of little help in this context. The quantities of metalworking debris found were negligible (p 231) and, as metalworking is both a specialized and "magic" process, its practice need not be incompatible with a religious site. Indeed, this is demonstrated by the quantities of metalworking debris found in early historic deposits during the Cathedral Hill excavations (pp 228-9,264-5).

While the skeletal remains in the phase one and two ditch levels may suggest the ritual associations of the ditch, the form of enclosure which the ditch is believed to have defined may suggest parallels with other sites which are interpreted as foci of ritual activity. According



to the excavators, the excavated ditch "... appears to form the arc of a circle of rather smaller diameter than the present [cathedral] graveyard wall.... it may be tentatively suggested that the ditch enclosed an area 50 m in diameter with its centre to the S of the present cathedral..."

(Brown and Harper 1985:112). In addition, the layers comprising phase two - the main bulk - of the ditch fill (pp 223-4) are interpreted as having been derived from an outer bank (ibid:112):

The active use of the ditch as a protective enclosure appears to have been brought to an end when material from an outer bank was pushed back into the ditch. A substantial deposit of red stony clay appeared in all three of the ditch sections, with tip-lines indicating that it had been derived from the S side of the ditch.

This arrangement - a substantial ditch within an external bank - has already been encountered in the large enclosures at the royal sites of Navan Fort, Tara and Knockaulin (pp 15,81-2). Although the earthworks themselves are undated and are currently the subject of debate (pp 89-91), the structures within the interior of Navan Fort belong to the late Bronze Age and Iron Age and those at Knockaulin to the Iron Age, thereby attesting the association of earthwork enclosures with ritual activity during later prehistory (pp 85-91).

In addition to sharing a hill-top location, the postulated enclosure on Cathedral Hill may exhibit another characteristic of enclosures such as Navan Fort. If Brown and Harper's (1985:112; quoted above) interpretation of the size and location of the postulated enclosure is correct, then the earthworks would not be concentric with the contours of the hill. This is a feature which has already been noted in the siting of the enclosures at Navan Fort and Knockaulin and which, together with their internal ditch and external bank, suggests that they were not defensive in function (pp 81-2). The ditch, it seems, is un-

likely to have belonged to a "protective enclosure" (pace *ibid*:112), at least not in a physical sense.

Another analogy which may be drawn between the Cathedral Hill ditch and Navan Fort concerns the infilling of the ditch and the destruction of the multiple post-ring structure at Navan Fort. In both cases, these appear to have been sudden, deliberate and complete actions. Shortly after its construction, the timber post-ring structure was partially filled with limestone blocks, set alight, and then entombed within a sod mound (Lynn 1986:18-9; p 87, above). On Cathedral Hill, the ditch was almost completely infilled, apparently by pushing an external bank into it, and after only comparatively light silt deposits had accumulated in its base, suggesting that this may have occurred fairly shortly after construction. A ritual interpretation has been advanced for such a sudden and wholesale destruction in the case of Navan Fort (Mallory *nd* a; Lynn 1986:19) and the incorporation of human skeletal remains - an articulated skeleton and a skull - within the destruction levels of the Cathedral Hill ditch are perhaps further evidence of the ritual nature of this act.

Assuming that the Cathedral Hill ditch did belong to a hill-top enclosure, one may speculate as to the possible nature of other activity and structures on the hill-top. The existence of a boundary marker containing deposits which appear to be associated with ritual activity implies that the hill-top was perceived to be of special status, and may have been the focus of further activity. For example, that some of the skeletal material within the ditch was deposited in an fragmentary state indicates that these deposits were derived from another context. That context may have been on the summit of Cathedral Hill and would have



been the one in which, by whatever means, the corpses were stripped of their flesh, with some of the remains of this process being deliberately selected for deposition in the enclosing ditch. It is possible that these activities were focussed on a site or structure of pre-existing significance. Indeed, given that a stone circle formerly stood a short distance to the south-west of Cathedral Hill (p 258), that evidence of other Neolithic activity has been uncovered within Armagh (Lynn 1988b), and that Neolithic or Bronze Age funerary mounds are known or suspected to have existed within the environs of Armagh (pp 142-3,275), it is not inconceivable that the summit of Cathedral Hill was occupied by a pre-historic burial mound. A possible analogy for the association of such a monument with Iron Age mortuary practices would be Cairn H at Loughcrew, with the Iron Age disturbance of, and deposition within, its burial chamber, and the deposition of cremated human skeletal remains over the covering mound (pp 236-7). The speculative existence of such a monument is doubly attractive, because it mirrors the parallelism between Cathedral Hill and Navan Fort which is evident within the toponymy and mythology of *Ard Macha* and *Emain Macha* - two hill-top enclosures, both associated with ritual activity, and each enclosing a mound within its interior (even if that within Navan Fort is of Iron Age date).

In conclusion, the totality of the evidence from Cathedral Hill - artefacts, faunal and skeletal assemblages, stratigraphy and carbon-14 dates - points to an Iron Age date of construction for the ditch. Indeed, it is only with the phase three deposits, within the hollow of the largely infilled ditch, that activity of the early historic period may be identified, on the basis of artefactual evidence. The lower layers within the ditch produced little artefactual material. Unlike the

phase three ditch deposits, those of phases one and two - the basal silts and the deliberate infill - contain quantities of human skeletal material, including an articulated skeleton which the excavators identify as a pagan burial (Brown and Harper 1985:112; pp 223-4, 231-4, above).

That the ditch and its phases one and two deposits belong to the Iron Age may also be supported by analogy. These include the deposition of human remains within the ditches of sacred or religious enclosures; the deliberate selection of bones - both human and animal - for deposition or redeposition, the practice of excarnation and the cult of the head; enclosures comprising a ditch with external bank; hill-top enclosures which do not follow the contours of the hill which they occupy; and the sudden and intensive destruction of structures which appear to be associated with ritual activity and deposits. In each of these cases the analogy is a late Bronze Age or Iron Age one. The features and practices revealed and suggested by the excavation of the Cathedral Hill ditch are simply not consistent with, and are unattested in, early historic Ireland. Moreover, many of the later prehistoric parallels which are cited here have, with the exceptions of excarnation and possibly ditch deposits, an Irish provenance, with several also being attested at the nearby enclosure of Navan Fort. The ditch on Cathedral Hill and its phase one and two deposits, therefore, belong to later prehistory, and most probably the Iron Age. The ditch seems to have been almost completely infilled before the commencement of activity on the hill-top during the early historic period. During that period, however, the ditch was still visible, but only as a shallow hollow, and it is within this hollow that the early historic deposits and metal-



working debris accumulated. The implications of this for the ecclesiastical topography of early historic Armagh will now be considered.

#### The Ecclesiastical Enclosures and their Buildings

Having reviewed firstly the nature of the evidence and secondly the evidence for the form, function and date of the ditch on Cathedral Hill, the topography of early historic Armagh may now be considered. This will be conducted in two parts. Firstly, the nature and extent of the ecclesiastical enclosures, and the location of the various churches and other buildings within them, will be considered. Secondly, an attempt will be made in the following section to identify the spatial divisions within the enclosures. The results will be integrated in the following chapter, where the significance of this spatial organization, and that of the cults observed there, will be assessed.

Although they do not survive as upstanding earthworks, the course of the boundaries of the ecclesiastical enclosures on Cathedral Hill are believed to be traceable. The first attempt to identify their course within the circular street pattern of Armagh is made by an unnamed individual quoted by Stuart (1819:588-9):

"We are informed by historians, that this place has been frequently taken and destroyed. May we not, therefore, naturally conclude, that it was fortified, according to the system of that period to guard it against similar disasters? What I allude to may have been lines of circumvallation, with their fosses, which, in consequence of the various changes which the surface has since undergone, by the erection of houses, the cultivation of gardens, the alteration of roads, &c now only produce here and there, a more sudden descent, on the sides of the hill, in its line of inclination towards the surrounding valley.

"Taking the middle part of the cathedral as a centre, the distance from this point seems to vary, being apparently higher on the western face of the hill, than any where else. On the northern, it appears to be at the greatest distance, which may be attributed to the following cause:- The ascent of the hill being here less

rapid, the place on this side was more assailable, and an additional work may have been formed, at some distance from the principal, to increase its security.

"If we commence our inspection of the upper line of circumvallation, on the western side, we may perceive a sudden descent in the inclination of the hill, immediately under the gardens belonging to the widows' and vicars' houses. This descent has been visibly increased by the formation of the present road, made for the purpose of avoiding the ascent over the hill. From this western point, the line of circumvallation continues northerly, in a circular direction, passing between the infirmary and library; then crossing Abbey-street, it traverses the gardens and enters Market-street... Crossing this street, in an ascending direction, it runs beneath the rear of the houses of Castle street, crossing the upper part of Chapel-lane; and from thence [sic] to its beginning is lost by the improvement of Castle-street, and that part of Irish-street which it once [sic] passed.

"That which I consider as an additional line of defence, is indicated at present by a second descent in the inclination of the hill. Its distance from the upper, seldom exceeds from sixty to seventy feet, except on the northern side. It commences by extending from the upper one, on the north western side, and passes below the infirmary, continuing its course through the gardens behind the houses in Abbey-street. Crossing this street, it runs through the ground on which Wesley's chapel is now erected. Crossing Abbey-lane, it passes behind the Presbyterian meeting-house, and through the gardens, until it enters Market-street, about fifty or sixty feet below the upper line. Crossing this street, in a direction through the present Market-house, it passes the opposite side of the street... From thence traversing the gardens, in a circular direction, and nearly parallel to the upper line, it crosses Chapel-lane and Irish-street, terminating its circular course somewhere between that street and Callan-street; from whence it may have ascended the hill to join the upper line. The face of the hill being, on this side, more steep and difficult of ascent, presented a natural, strong barrier, that did not require a double line of defence."

(Note that some of the street names given in earlier publications have since changed).

It may be observed that the line of enclosure detected "... beneath the rears of the houses of Castle-street..." must lie on the south of Castle Street, because it crosses Chapel Lane. It cannot, therefore, be identified with the excavated ditch between Castle Street and the graveyard wall. Later sources, however, appear to favour a more direct relationship between the line of the earthworks and Castle Street.



Reeves (1860:14) mirrors the course outlined by Stuart's informant but does not mention Castle Street by name: "... the upper enclosure or entrenchment, commencing on the west, observed pretty much the course of Callan Street, the circle being continued across Abbey Street, a little below the Infirmary, and through the gardens, round to Market Street. The lower enclosure leaves still a trace where it crossed Abbey Street at the Wesleyan chapel". The remaining arc of its circuit, however, lying between Market Street and Callan Street, is traced by Castle Street. Paterson and Davies (1940b:98) advocate a close relationship between the course of the ecclesiastical boundaries and the modern street-plan:

The rampart of the inner ring followed the curve of the gardens at the back of Vicars' Hill, and after leaving Callan Street it crossed Abbey Street, and thence across Market Street to Castle Street and round to Vicars' Hill. Between this and the second ring was a space of 60-70 feet. The second ring followed fairly closely the line of the inner ring, and may still be traced by a dip in Abbey Street below the Methodist Chapel, and in Market Street, where it passed directly under the old Market House...

Henry's (1967: fig 2) acceptance that the contemporary street-plan fossilizes the lines of the ecclesiastical enclosures is indicated by her superimposition of the early historic churches and spatial divisions upon a modern (sketch) map of Armagh (fig 18). Lastly, Swan (1985:84) observes that:

... the curving lines of the street pattern which surrounds the cathedral in an arc from the east clockwise to the north-west and which continues to the north and north-east in the form of property boundaries constitutes a complete enclosure.... Outside this inner enclosure the street pattern can be seen to form a massive outer enclosure which is continuous from the north round to the south-west. Its further continuation can be traced in some of the property boundaries and field fences to the west and north-west.

The area thus delineated is oval in plan and measures approximately 250 m north-south by 200 m east-west (Swan 1985:84). This is usually interpreted as the extent of the enclosure which is referred to in the

annals as the *Raith* (AU sa 1074; trans MacAirt and MacNiocaill 1983:511; see also AU sa 1091, 1092, 1112, 1121, 1122, 1166, 1189, 1196): "Ard Macha was burned on the Tuesday after Mayday [6 May] with all its churches and bells, both the *Raith* and the Third (*raith 7 trian*)". That the *Raith* itself is much earlier than these eleventh and twelfth century sources is indicated by a reference to it in the mid-seventh century *Liber angeli*. This states that the *Raith* is situated on a "*locum... in alto positum*" (ed Bieler 1979:184), most probably refering to the summit of Cathedral Hill.

That the boundary of the inner enclosure followed the course of the present Castle Street may be supported by Bartlett's map of 1601/02 (reproduced in Hayes-McCoy 1964:6-7, pl 3; fig 14, below). This shows a high cross standing immediately outside the eastern entrance of the cathedral's enclosure at the top of Market Street. Reeves (1860:19) identifies this entrance with the *doras ratha* ("door/gate of the *Raith*) (AU sa 1121; 1166; the former is quoted on p 308, below). This high cross appears to have had chequered fortunes, having been re-erected twice during the mid-eighteenth century, toppled in 1813 (Stuart 1819: 143, 197, 509), and finally re-erected within the cathedral in 1916. Concerning its first re-erection, Paterson (1955:190) states that, "We know it was in disrepair in 1744, in which year the Corporation of Armagh erected it securely in its original position above the ancient well in Market Street over which it had been set up long centuries previous. In 1759 the Stone Cross Well was repaired...". This statement, however, appears to conflict with Rocque's map of 1760, which sites the high cross down-hill from the well, unless Paterson means "above" in the sense of "standing over", rather than "being up-hill from". Regardless



of the precise nature of the physical relationship between the well and the high cross, that they were perceived to be associated is indicated by the well's name, while an annalistic reference to the "*crois do-suir Ratha*" ("cross of the door of the *Raith*) (AU sa 1166; p 308, below) attests the perceived relationship between what appears to be the Market Cross and the door of the *Raith*. Although Rocque's map locates the cross about half way between what appear to be the lines of the inner and outer enclosures, this is still only a short distance downhill from the point where Castle Street meets Market Street, suggesting that the course of Castle Street may be identified with that of the enclosure depicted by Bartlett.

As well as the cathedral, Bartlett depicts the inner enclosure as also holding a church, to the south-east of the cathedral (the view is from the east). From early seventeenth century Crown sources, this church is believed to be the *Céli Dé* priory, which stood on the north side of Castle Street (Reeves 1860:21-5; Brown and Harper 1985:111), "... south-east of the cathedral, in what is now a series of gardens between the graveyard and Castle Street" (Paterson and Davies 1940b:97). If this identification is correct - and there is no reason to doubt it - then the ecclesiastical boundary which existed at the beginning of the seventeenth century appears to have followed the line of Castle Street.

This interpretation, however, leaves a considerable chronological gap between the evidence of Bartlett's map and the early historic period generally, let alone the possibly fifth century foundation of Armagh. The empirical evidence with which to bridge this gap simply does not exist, although it is possible that it may be retrieved by excavation at a future date. However, one may resort to parallels in the form of a

comparative analysis of the surviving boundaries of comparable early ecclesiastical sites.

Swan (1985) considers the aerial photographic and cartographic evidence for the plans of twelve large ecclesiastical sites. His study indicates that the course of the boundaries of such sites survive even in cases where there is no visible evidence of the actual earthworks which presumably marked these boundaries: "The pattern of streets, roads or field fences *almost invariably* provides an indication of the outline and dimensions of the *original enclosure*, whether circular, oval or sub-rectangular" (Swan 1985:77; emphases mine). For example, of Duleek, Co Meath, Swan (1985:80) states that "The aerial photograph reveals a large oval enclosure defined by the modern street pattern to the south, south-east, north-east and north, and by a disused laneway to the north-west. To the south of the centre is the churchyard and burial area, now shown as an irregularly shaped inner enclosure, but the curves of the laneway that bound it to the north hint at a more regularly oval or sub-rectangular outline".

The perpetuation of these boundaries may reflect the survival of a cognitive or qualitative distinction between an internal, enclosed, area and an external area which the original boundary marker manifested physically. The possible nature of such a qualitative distinction and the form and symbolic status of boundaries and boundary markers is discussed below (pp 289-91, 305-16, 327-8). Possibly related to this is the apparent survival of ecclesiastical boundaries as later property boundaries. For example, Reeves' map of 1860, which is constructed from mid-eighteenth century sources, plots the endowments of land within the city which were held by various ecclesiastical office holders (fig 11).



These patterns of landholding were presumably established after the inquisitions held in the early seventeenth century to settle the ownership of lands and properties formerly held by the then dissolved monastic houses. The lines of the presumed ecclesiastical boundaries appear to be integral to this pattern of landholding, perhaps suggesting the existence of a relationship between the layouts of post-Medieval and early historic Armagh.

However, the ditch on Cathedral Hill (Brown and Harper 1985; pp 221-49, above) has a direct bearing on whether the street-plan of modern Armagh perpetuates the line of the ecclesiastical boundaries or not. This is because the ditch does not lie on a line followed by the modern street plan but in the area between Castle Street and the wall of the cathedral graveyard. The outer lip of the ditch lies about 21.5 m north of the north side of Castle Street and about 12 m south of the south wall of the graveyard (fig 15). If the ditch marks the boundary of the (innermost) early historic ecclesiastical enclosure then there would appear to be grounds for challenging the hypothesis that Armagh's street plan fossilizes the layout of the early ecclesiastical enclosure. However, Lynn and McDowell (1988a:58) suggest that this possible discrepancy, between the lines of the excavated ditch and the putative ecclesiastical boundary which may be fossilized in the course of Castle Street is of no great significance (but see pp 364-5);

It has been suggested that the curve of Castle Street corresponds to the line of the rath, but a substantial early ditch on a different line was found near here in excavations in 1967. Given the long period of time involved, however, it is likely that the hill was enclosed in a series of earthworks, any one, or several, of which could have been the historic 'rath'...

This issue is resolved, however, by the Iron Age date of the excavated ditch (pp 221-49). Although it was still visible as a faint

hollow during the early historic period (pp 229-31, 248-9), the ditch did not constitute an impressive feature and there appears to be no evidence to support its use as a boundary marker then. Rather, on the evidence of Bartlett's map and on analogy with other early ecclesiastical sites, such as those discussed by Swan (1985; p 254, above), the ecclesiastical boundaries appear to be fossilized within the post-Medieval street-plan of Armagh. This, however, is not to dismiss the Iron Age ditch as irrelevant. It survived partially into the early historic period - albeit merely as an eroding hollow - and presumably was visible when the church of Armagh was founded. As a result, it - and the apparently pagan religious significance of Cathedral Hill, as revealed by the stone carvings found there (pp 191, 240) - may have exerted some influence on the choice of Cathedral Hill as the location of an early Christian foundation, possibly illustrating the investment of meaning within an earlier monument.

The construction of enclosing earthworks on Cathedral Hill is recorded on two occasions during the Medieval period. The *Annals of Ulster* (sa 1264; trans MacCarthy 1893:337) records that "The archbishop of Ard Macha, namely, Máel Patraic Ua Sgannail, made a ditch around Ard Macha". This occurred in the same year as the construction of the Cathedral of Armagh. The other recorded example is of a different nature

(AFM sa 1561; trans O'Donovan 1856, 5:1585):

The Lord Chief Justice of Ireland, Thomas Fitz-Walter, proceeded into Tyrone... He pitched his camp of numerous hosts at Armagh; and he erected strong raths and impregnable ramparts (*rátha rodoimne, 7 dúnchlaidh díorthocchlaighi*) around the great church (*tempaill móir*) of Armagh, in order that he might leave warders constantly guarding that place.

The course of the enclosing earthworks is uncertain in both cases but may be consistent with what appears to have been the line of the inner-



most ecclesiastical enclosure, the *Raith*, along Castle Street. However, there is some doubt about this and the English defences may have incorporated the earthworks of a further, smaller, central enclosure. This will be discussed below (pp 265-71), after considering the evidence for the line of the outermost ecclesiastical boundary.

In contrast to the attention devoted to the boundary of the *Raith*, the course of the boundary of an outer enclosure has been largely neglected. Reeves (1860:14) could only define that part of the boundary which was followed by the upper part of Abbey Street, although his map (fig 11) implies that he was aware of its full circuit. Similarly, its position is implicit in Henry's (1967, fig 2) interpretative plan of Armagh (fig 18). However, it is only recently that the line of this

boundary has been defined completely. Swan (1985:84) states that:  
... the street pattern can be seen to form a massive outer enclosure, which is continuous from the north round to the south-west. Its further continuation can be traced in some of the property boundaries and field fences to the west and north-west. The outer enclosure is also oval, more or less following the lines of the inner enclosure, but in this case on a vastly greater scale. The north-south diameter is 480 metres and east-west it must have measured not less than 360 metres. Again property boundaries and streets radiate fairly regularly from the inner to the outer enclosure.

Swan traces the fossilized line of the outer enclosure boundary within the street plan of Armagh in a similar manner to the inner enclosure. The streets which preserve its route are Abbey Street on the north, Upper English Street on the north-east and east, Thomas Street on the south-east, Ogle Street on the south, and the south-eastern arm of Navan Street on the south-west. The course of the boundary on the west appears initially to be unconvincing. On Reeves' map (fig 11), the boundary can be followed from the south-eastern arm of Navan Street northwards into New Street, now known as Culdee Drive. The course of

this street appears to diverge from the projected line of the outer enclosure, and thereby forming a marked indentation in the line of this boundary. However, located within the bend in Culdee Drive is Armagh gasworks, whose construction in 1834 involved the destruction of what appears to have been a prehistoric site. Paterson (1953:70) laments that "... a prehistoric monument was demolished on the ground now held by the company, a structure that would have made Armagh unique among Irish towns had it been preserved". In the entry under "The Gooseberry Gardens 1800", Paterson (unpub:62) states that:

These contained arbours and were a place of assembly from May to October but more especially so in the season of the gooseberries - hence the name. They contained a circle of standing stones which served as a place of entertainment for small boys and girls who played hide and seek amongst them....

The site is now occupied by the Gas Works and the (building of) the circle of stones was demolished and the gardens obliterated [sic].

Under the entry for "The Gas Works", Paterson (unpub:95) goes on to say that, "In the erection of the premises a fine stone circle dating back to prehistoric times was most wantonly destroyed". Paterson, however, does not give his sources, although it is possible that these were "... some local newspaper" (Weatherup in lit, 18.7.89).

The presence of this stone circle may have dictated the indenting of the outer enclosure at this point. The ecclesiastical boundary may have sought to exclude the stone circle from the interior of the enclosure, denying the presence of this particular pagan monument on consecrated ground. Once again, this indicates that monuments may be invested with social meaning and significance, but suggests that, unlike those discussed so far, some monuments are apparently invested with "negative" or sinister associations and, as a result, may be shunned by later occupants of the landscape. This contrasts with prehistoric



enclosures such as *Ráth na Ríogh* at Tara, the earthworks of which appear to diverge in order to incorporate the Neolithic passage tomb of *Duma na nGiall* within its interior (figs 7 and 8). Finally, on the north-west of its circuit, the course of the outer enclosure boundary can be traced in property boundaries, and may have incorporated a length of Whalley's Lane, which is no longer extant.

The two spatial units within Armagh which are mentioned recurringly in the annals are the *Raith* and *Tríán*. The former is identified with the inner ecclesiastical enclosure (pp 251-2), while the latter are the internal divisions (pp 276-87). This may mirror the distinction which the *Liber angeli* (ed Bieler 1979:184) makes between the *Raith* and the *suburbana* ("suburbs"). Reeves (1860:14-9) locates within the *Raith* many of the ecclesiastical buildings which the annals record in Armagh, although there is no unequivocal evidence for this. Only the briefest references to those structures which stood within the *Raith* are contained in the annals. These references are to a *tempull* ("church") (AU sa 1092; trans MacAirt and MacNiocaill 1983:527; see also AU sa 1112), "The *Raith* of Ard Macha with its church (*tempull*) was burned ...", and to *templaibh* ("churches") (AU sa 1166; trans MacCarthy 1893:153; quoted on p 308, below). These entries most probably refer to the city's principal church, the *Damliac Mór* ("the great stone church") (AU sa 1020; 1125). The inner enclosure may have held comparatively few ecclesiastical buildings. Certainly, the *Daimliac Mór*, *cimiterio regum* ("royal cemetery") (AU sa 934); and probably the *cloítech* (bell tower) (AU sa 1020) were located there, while a graveyard lay adjacent to the church (Reeves 1860:12). In accordance with the likely status of the central enclosure as the most sacred zone of the ecclesiastical settle-

ment (pp 290-1,327-8), it is possible that this area comprised a largely open precinct, with the *Daimliac* at its centre and the *cloitech* "... probably about forty feet from the north-west angle" of the *Daimliac* (Reeves 1860:14).

The other twelve buildings which Reeves (1860:14-9) locates within the *Raith* are perhaps more likely to have lain within the area of the outer enclosure, expressing a zoning of functions within Armagh. For instance, the inner enclosure may have been solely devoted to a small number of ecclesiastical buildings and was of the greatest sanctity: "Within the upper ring all the edifices were ecclesiastical" (Reeves 1860:14). The locations of the *Saball* ("Barn") (ibid:15) and the *Daimliac na Togha* or *Toi* ("Stone Church of the Elections") (ibid:16) are uncertain, but as they appear to have been important churches, they may also have been located within the *Raith*. Reeves (1860:16) equates the latter with the *australi basilica* ("southern church") which is mentioned in the *Liber angeli* (§15-6; ed Bieler 1979:186) and *Vita tripartita* (ed Stokes 1887,2:354) and places it "on the south side of the present cathedral", while Henry (1967:41) states that it stood "parallel to the nave [of the cathedral] and abutting the south transept" (but see p 342, below, where it is tentatively identified with the Church of St Brigit). The source of this information is not apparent, although a small ruined building, apparently a chapel or oratory, is depicted by Bartlett in this location.

Bartlett depicts three other ecclesiastical buildings as lying to the south of the cathedral. One of these appears to be located immediately inside the earthwork which may mark the boundary of the *Raith* and is identified as the priory of the *Céli Dé* (pp 253,262-3). An



oratory lies immediately to the south of this larger structure but outwith the line of enclosure which Bartlett depicts. Further to the south lies a larger ecclesiastical structure. The most likely identification of this is the *reclasa Brigte* ("Church of [St] Brigit") (AFM sa 1085; AU sa 1085, 1179, 1189), which was located within the south-eastern quarter of the ecclesiastical settlement (p 279). On the basis of its location, and the absence of a more suitable candidate, this may be identified as the *australi bassilica*. There are no grounds for identifying the *australi bassilica* with *Tempull na Ferta*. The latter foundation lay to the east of Cathedral Hill and outwith the ecclesiastical enclosures, while the context in which the *australi bassilica* is mentioned in the *Liber angeli* indicates that its location is contrasted with that of an *aeclessiae aquilonalis plagae* ("church of the northern part") (p 340). The implication appears to be that both of these churches lay within the (enclosed) area of the ecclesiastical settlement, one on the north, the other on the south.

Reeves (1860:15) equates the *Saball* with the *sinistralis aeclessiae* ("northern church") which is mentioned by Muirchu (1:24,16; ed Bieler 1979:110) and in the *Vita tripartita* (ed Stokes 1887,1:292) and states that, "... we suppose it to have stood somewhere near the extremity of the north transept of the present cathedral". However, this identification is unconfirmed and, as the northern half of Armagh appears symbolically to have included the *Raith* anyway (pp 333,349), no further information regarding its location can be gained.

Both these churches, as well as the *Daimliac Mór* and the *cloitech*, were destroyed by fire sa 1020 (AU; trans MacAirt and MacNiocaill 1983: 457):

All Ard Macha was completely burned on the third of the Kalends of June [30 May], the Monday before Whitsun, ie the great stone church (*dam liac mór*) with its lead roof and the bell-house (*cloicthech*) with its bells and the *Saball* [church] and the *Toae* [church] and the abbot's chariot (*carbad na n-abad*) and the old preaching chair.

This may suggest that they stood in the same area of the city, near to, if not within, the central enclosure, although the entry's statement that Armagh was "completely burned" may negate any inferences about their possible close proximity. According to Reeves (1860:15), the *Saball* "... may have derived this peculiar name, as the only other church in Ireland so called, namely, *Sabhall Patraic* or Saul, near Downpatrick, is said to have done, from its unusual bearing, north and south". A small number of churches are reputed by sources of varying antiquity to have been orientated north-south (Hamlin 1984:119), while a surviving example is Temple Benen, Inishmore, Aran Isles (Leask 1955: 49). The significance of a north-south orientation may lie in a biblical archetype (p 352).

An apparently later foundation which may have lain within the *Raith* is the priory of the *Céli Dé*. The presence of the *Céli Dé* in Armagh is first recorded sa 920 (AU; trans MacAirt and MacNiocaill 1983:373):  
Ard Macha was invaded by the foreigners of Ath Cliath... and the prayer houses (*taigi aernaighi*) with their complement of culdees (*Céli Dé*) and sick he [Gothfrith grandson of Ivar] spared from destruction, and also the monastery, save for a few dwellings which were burned through carelessness.

This, however, does not constitute an unambiguous reference to the existence of the *Céli Dé* priory (pace Paterson and Davies 1940b:97), which is of uncertain date. The priory appears to have been used as an archiepiscopal residence during the Medieval period (ibid:97) and is depicted in Bartlett's map of 1601/02 as a roofless shell within the interior of the earthwork enclosure which the Cathedral occupies and



just to the south of the cathedral (fig 14). The priory is believed to have been located on the north side of Castle Street (p 253), within the interior of the *Raith* and in the approximate area of Brown and Harper's (1985) excavations. A wall (wall D) was revealed in trench 3, which, "Although it was at the bottom of a 19th-century cut it may perhaps be part of one of the buildings of the Culdee priory..." (ibid:157).

The location of unconsecrated, but nevertheless important, buildings is unclear. These include the *Teach Screaptra* ("House of Writings", ie library or *scriptorium*) (AFM sa 1020), the *chucín* ("kitchen") (AU sa 915), and the *Lís Aeidhedh* ("the Enclosure of Guests", ie hospice) (AFM sa 1003, 1015, 1155). With the possible exception of the *scriptorium*, these are not perhaps the type of structures which one might expect to find within the central, sacred precinct of such a large and important ecclesiastical settlement: cooking and baking are mundane in nature and present a potential risk of fire, whilst guests would have included lay persons, one of the reasons why "The guesthouse was, not unnaturally, distanced from the inner area of the monastery and sometimes had its own enclosure (*les*)" (Hamlin 1985:297). At an earlier stage of its development, it is possible that the ecclesiastical foundation comprised a single enclosure which held all the buildings, irrespective of function. However, by the period in which it reached the form in which it can be traced today, some form of qualitative distinction may have existed between the enclosures, this being expressed in terms of a spatial organization of the activities performed and the types of building located within the areas defined. As a result, the unconsecrated buildings and minor ecclesiastical foundations may have occupied a more peripheral location within the

ecclesiastical settlement. Certainly, a differential sanctity between the concentric zones of an ecclesiastical settlement is expressed in the eighth century *Collectio canonum Hibernensis* (quoted on pp 327-8).

The excavated evidence from Cathedral Hill need not contradict this interpretation of ascending sacrality towards the centre of the ecclesiastical settlement. The excavations in Castle Street, apparently just within the interior of the *Raith*, revealed evidence of eighth and ninth century metalworking, including mould fragments, crucibles, tuyere fragments and scrap metal (Brown and Harper 1985:136-43,145-51; pp 225, 228,231, above). Initially, this may appear to be inconsistent with the (presumed) sacred status of the *Raith*, but other ecclesiastical sites have also yielded evidence of metalworking (below). Here, the role of metalworking, which in this context is analogous to that of the *scriptorium*, is in the production of sacred things.

The metalwork produced on Cathedral Hill underlines the religious context of this activity. Finds included a possible shrine fitting (Brown and Harper 1985:128,131-3, no 33), a strap-end, "perhaps from a book binding" (though also "perhaps Medieval") (ibid:130, no 130), and detritus from the production of penannular brooches. The manufacture of metalwork for religious items is perhaps to be expected within such an important foundation as Armagh, and is paralleled by evidence from other ecclesiastical sites, such as Nendrum (Lawlor 1925:17,136-7,140-6, pl 11; ASNI 1966:292-5) and Movilla (Ivens 1988a), both Co Down. One can perhaps detect in this the ecclesiastical adoption of, or involvement in, the symbolic and ideological dimension of secular material culture.

Indeed, Nieke and Duncan (1988:14) note that:

It is surely significant... that the figure of Christ on a late ninth to tenth century high cross from Monasterboice is seen wearing a penannular brooch (Henry 1967: pl 79). If the brooches



are seen as a symbol of social position, then this may indicate the high status of ecclesiastical figures within Early Historic society .... It may also indicate that as well as symbolising relationships within secular society such brooches also evoked religious connotations. What we may be witnessing here is the deliberate adoption and use by the Church of an item of material culture originally created and used within a pagan milieu. Of course this material culture was most familiar to the early ecclesiastics. However, the exploitation of material culture in this manner by the new religious authority was probably of major importance in legitimising the position of the new institution within pagan society.

The *Raith* appears to be the principal internal feature in the layout of the ecclesiastical settlement. This is suggested by the frequent references to it in annalistic entries relating to Armagh (eg AU sa 1074, 1091, 1092, 1112, 1121, 1122, 1166, 1189, 1196). However, there is, as implied above (pp 254-5), a possibility that a further concentric internal division may have existed. The evidence for this may be discussed before the radial internal divisions, their boundaries and churches are considered.

Firstly, the presumed extent of the *Raith*, as defined above (pp 251-7), is large. According to Swan (1985:84), it measures 250 m north-south by 200 m east-west, which makes it considerably larger than the central enclosures of the other ecclesiastical sites which he considers. Of these sites, Killala, Co Mayo, has the next largest internal enclosure, at 170 m by 150 m (ibid:91) (all the enclosures are sub-circular in plan, with the dimensions of the longest and shortest axes being given). However, Kildare, perhaps the most powerful foundation in southern Ireland, has an internal enclosure which measures only 100 m north-south by 110 m east-west, while that at Monasterboice is only 75 m by 85 m. It seems possible, therefore, that on analogy with the size of

the central enclosures of comparable foundations, the *Raith* at Armagh may not represent the innermost enclosure.

Secondly, Swan (1985:77) notes of early historic ecclesiastical settlements which are preserved in modern towns that the "... inner enclosure... generally contains the most important ecclesiastical remains as well as the burial ground". In some cases, such as Cashel and Monasterboice (and approximately so at Kells, Co Meath and Lusk, Co Dublin), the present churchyard or burial ground is coterminous with the area of the inner enclosure (ibid:98; fig 4.16; fig 19, below). At Armagh, the walled graveyard constitutes an enclosure, roughly oval in plan and measuring 100 m north-south by 80 m east-west, which occupies the level summit of Cathedral Hill and within which the cathedral is situated. The graveyard does not extend eastwards as far as the former boundary of the *Raith* as Swan (1985:98, fig 4.16; fig 19, below) indicates on his plan, although this is church land. This is clearly indicated in Reeves' (1860) map (fig 11). Rather, the graveyard wall appears to define a spatially discrete area, which may indicate that it was perceived to be distinct from the space beyond it, rather than just comprising part of the area of the central enclosure. As the smallest and central spatial unit within the concentric layout of the city, this feature may fossilize a third and innermost enclosure. Indeed, this appears to be what Reeves (1860:12) is alluding to when he describes "The apex of the hill being probably enclosed with an earthen rampart, and the slope having likewise two entrenched defences ...", although he appears to make no further reference to this third and innermost enclosure.



Like the *Raith* and the outer enclosure, this postulated inner enclosure is integrated within the street-plan of Armagh. It is bounded on the west by Vicars' Hill (formerly Pound Hill) and on the north by Cathedral Close (formerly Church Lane). Interestingly, Henry (1967, fig 2; fig 18, below) incorporates the line of Vicars' Hill in her sketch-map of the early ecclesiastical settlement, where it is depicted as marking the western boundary of the *Raith* and the eastern boundary of a crescentic area, bounded by the upper arms of Callan Street on the west, in which she locates the abbot's house. Henry, therefore, appears to accept the antiquity of what is proposed here as the western boundary of the innermost enclosure. The status of the line preserved by Vicars' Hill as a boundary is emphasized by its role as one of the radial boundaries which are evident within the topography of the city. This heightens the spatial distinction between the area enclosed by the graveyard wall, the western side of which is bounded by Vicars' Hill, from the crescentic area to the west which ostensibly lies within the area of the *Raith*.

Bartlett's map appears to depict the ruins of the Medieval archiepiscopal residence, Archbishop's Court, as lying to the west of the cathedral, but possibly outside the enclosure which the cathedral occupies. This is ambiguous however, because Bartlett appears to depict the earthwork as running in a north-westerly direction, possibly in order to encompass Archbishop's Court, although there is no corresponding feature to the south. Indeed, the vagueness of Bartlett's depiction of the enclosure may suggest that he has conflated two lines of enclosure, that of the central enclosure defined here and that of the *Raith*. This may be supported by the observation that, although Bartlett

depicts the remains of the *Céli Dé* priory as lying within the enclosure, the enclosure boundary appears to have to veer to the south in order to incorporate it within its interior (fig 14). It may be that Bartlett was drawing from memory.

Furthermore, it is stated that "The railings and gates of the Cathedral yard superseded in 1834 the stone fortifications erected in the 16th century" (Cathedral nd:16; cf Paterson and Davies 1940b:86, fig II). It is unclear whether these "stone fortifications" may be equated with the earthworks whose construction is recorded ca 1561 (AFM; quoted on p 256, above). However, Bartlett's map of forty years later depicts only one line of enclosure on the hill and that, from the position of the Market Cross immediately outside its eastern entrance, may be equated with the line of Castle Street and the boundary of the *Raith* (pp 252-3). The information contained within Bartlett's map appears, on this matter, to be in conflict with the topographical evidence relating to, and antiquarian accounts (such as that related by Stuart, pp 249-50, above) of, Cathedral Hill. Given the possible presence of error or artistic licence in Bartlett's map, it would be unrealistic to accord this source precedence in the analysis and interpretation of evidence relating to the boundaries of early historic and Medieval Armagh.

Reeves (1860:17) locates Archbishop's Court "... at the north end of the Vicars' Hill..." and suggests that it "... may have been a relique of the old residence", ie the abbot's house, which passed into episcopal control with the eclipse of abbatial authority. However, Reeves (1860:16), in contrast to Henry, states that the abbot's house lay "... inside the Rath, but anciently enclosed within a rampart of its own". The latter point is suggested by the terminology employed in the



annals, where the abbot's residence appears as *Foruth na nAbbadh* (AU sa 822), *Lis nAbbadh* (AU sa 915), and *Teach nAbbadh mor* ("Great House of the Abbot") (AU sa 1116). Flanagan (1981:16) states that *lios* placenames generally relate to "earthen-banked forts", but notes (ibid:22) that "Of the nine *lios*-names recorded in the *Annals of Ulster*, five are ecclesiastical sites, one a castle and the remaining three just incidental references. Non-monastic *lios*-names seemed to be of little political consequence".

That the graveyard wall fossilizes a boundary belonging to the early historic period may possibly be inferred from the siting of the base and broken shaft of a high cross. This is located to the south-west of the cathedral and adjacent to the churchyard wall (Crawford 1927: fig 9; Roe 1955:108, pl 1; Henry 1967:42). One of the functions of high crosses appears to be as boundary markers (pp 305-16) and this may strengthen the hypothesis that the churchyard wall preserves the boundary of an earlier ecclesiastical enclosure. However, Rogers (nd:64) states that this cross base, which was formerly known as "St Patrick's Chair", is not in its original position, but formerly stood opposite the west door of the cathedral. It allegedly then became buried, before being exhumed and resited at an unknown date. Although its alleged position is consistent with the cardinal orientation of high crosses (pp 322-3,326), it is unclear if it originally stood on the line of the graveyard wall. Weatherup (in lit, 24.8.89) states that he can find no corroboration of Rogers' claims, but notes that the information on which these claims are based appears to be contemporary. Indeed, Rogers was the deputy librarian of Armagh Public Library (Lett 1912:32) and therefore presumably had good access to local information.

The perpetuation of the line of an earlier boundary marker by the present graveyard wall may be inferred from a feature revealed in the only trench of the 1968 excavations to extend as far as the wall, trench 1. This feature, area B, is a "... parallel-sided gully, 1.68 m wide... depth 1.14 m" (Brown and Harper 1985:120). It cut a Medieval pit and contained in its lower fill builders' debris and seventeenth and eighteenth century sherds. The excavators (ibid:157) remark that it "... may perhaps have some connection with Sussex's fortifications of the cathedral in the 16th century; it was of regular form and parallel to the present wall". If correct, this may cast further doubt on the identification of the enclosure portrayed by Bartlett as the innermost ecclesiastical enclosure.

The absence of evidence of an early historic boundary marker need not be of concern, as this feature may have lain directly underneath, or just inside, the present graveyard wall. Alternatively, it need not have been an earthwork at all, and the presence of hedges may be attested around some foundations (pp 291-2). This may explain why it is what now appears to be the middle enclosure (of three) which is termed the *Raith*, not because it was the innermost enclosure, but because its boundary was marked with enclosing earthworks, perhaps in contrast to the innermost enclosure. Also, if one can envisage two principal stages in the development of the ecclesiastical topography of early historic Armagh, the *Raith* may represent the extent of an earlier phase, perhaps enclosed by substantial earthworks, with the area of the outer enclosure possibly representing a later expansion. After expansion it is possible that the name, the *Raith*, was applied to the totality of the area which lay within what became the middle boundary marker. Thus, the name may have



come to be applied to what were originally, or perhaps still were, two discrete enclosures, that whose line is preserved in the course of Castle Street, and an innermost enclosure, which is now occupied by the cathedral churchyard. With the postulated expansion of early historic Armagh, it is possible that the *Raith* was perceived to be the ancient and sacred nucleus - the citadel - of the ecclesiastical settlement.

It should be emphasized that the arguments advanced here about the existence of an innermost ecclesiastical enclosure and the possible sequence of expansion of early historic Armagh cannot be proven. There is no relevant excavated evidence and the likelihood of any being recovered seems remote, if early historic Armagh's boundaries are fossilized within the modern street-plan and because of later disturbance on the summit of Cathedral Hill. Nevertheless, a plausible case for the existence of a small, central ecclesiastical enclosure may be made, and the hypotheses presented here will be deployed in the analysis of the symbolic significance of the ecclesiastical topography (chap 5).

Although the discussion so far has concentrated on the ecclesiastical boundaries and the structures which lay within them, some excavation has been undertaken beyond the outer boundary. This is potentially important for two main reasons. Firstly, it may give an indication of the use, if any, to which the areas immediately outside the outer boundary were put. This may be of assistance in attempting to decide on the manner in which the settlement developed during the early historic period, whether it was planned and laid out as a single unit or expanded organically - piecemeal - without obvious concern for the overall spatial organization which the settlement appears to exhibit.

Secondly, St Patrick's alleged earliest foundation in Armagh, *Tempull na Ferta*, allegedly occupied a slight knoll to the east of Cathedral Hill and is potentially invaluable to the study of Armagh's earliest Christian history.

The results of excavations in these areas have been rather mixed. A number of excavations were conducted in 1975-76 on sites scheduled for redevelopment (Lynn 1977a; 1977b; Lynn and McDowell 1988a). Excavations in Market Street, immediately outside the outer ecclesiastical boundary, and in Castle Street/Thomas Street and Abbey Street, within the area of the outer enclosure, revealed little or nothing in the way of evidence of early historic activity, the relevant levels being inaccessible, disturbed or simply absent (Lynn 1977a; 1977b:25-6).

However, excavation of a number of sites in Scotch Street, which leads east from Cathedral Hill, proved to be more productive. The earliest activity detected in this area, at 39-41 Scotch Street, is Neolithic in date and comprises a ring ditch, 12 m in internal diameter and of uncertain function (Lynn 1988b). In addition, "A sequence of features comprising part of a network of large, linear prehistoric ditches..." was revealed in the rear garden of 36 Scotch Street (Lynn forthcoming b). Lynn and McDowell (1988a:59) state that, "Those [ie Neolithic] remains tend to support, but do not prove, the suggestion that there were some visible prehistoric monuments on the knoll at the start of the Christian era. Such monuments, possibly grave-mounds, may have given the area an aura of sanctity in the minds of the local people and may have provided an appropriate ritual focus for a very early ecclesiastical settlement here". Although this may have been the case - and may be supported by toponymic evidence - Lynn (1988b:10) also



states, "That there was no evidence that the space inside the ditch was covered by a mound and the ring-ditch can only have been visible, if at all, as a slightly sunken ring when the area was next used in the Early Christian period".

Evidence of many early historic inhumation burials, apparently belonging to the same cemetery, was found on a number of excavated sites in Scotch Street (Lynn 1977b; forthcoming b; McDowell 1986; 1987; Lynn and McDowell 1988a). Despite the poor preservation of these burials they are important for several reasons. Firstly, the identification of mortuary features, such as oak log coffins and evidence of pairs of wooden upright grave markers (ibid:59; Lynn forthcoming b), are a valuable source of evidence relating to early Christian mortuary practices in Ireland, about which little is known. Secondly, these burials are of potential importance as a result of their early date. A carbon-14 date gives a *terminus post quem* of 265±30 ad (UB 2439) for a grave at 48 Scotch Street. This, when calibrated at two standard deviations, gives the date range AD 254 - 420 (Lynn forthcoming b), "... the only, but surely significant, evidence for activity at the site in the 'Patrician period'" (Lynn and McDowell 1988a:59). Further carbon-14 dates, when calibrated at two standard deviations, suggest that timber from a coffin on this site "... had been growing in or around the 6th century" (ibid:59). These dates are (Lynn forthcoming b):

UB 2437	440±50 ad	420-640 AD
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UB 2438	550±40 ad	560-685 AD
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However, the possibility that these samples represent core wood from plank coffins may suggest that these dates are earlier, possibly significantly earlier, than the burials themselves.

Although these dates are not precise enough to prove the existence of a Christian foundation which is contemporary with St Patrick's alleged activities at Armagh (ie about the mid-fifth century AD), they do suggest the presence of fairly early Christian activity on the site, "... possibly dating from the 6th or 7th century" (Lynn forthcoming b). This is of particular interest given that the site of *Tempull na Ferta* is traditionally believed to be bisected by Scotch Street (Reeves 1860: 10-1; Lynn and McDowell 1988a:60. Lynn [forthcoming b] includes a detailed analysis of the historical evidence). *Tempull na Ferta* is prominent within Patrician hagiography and, according to both Muirchu and the *Vita tripartita*, was the site of St Patrick's first ecclesiastical foundation in Armagh, before being granted Cathedral Hill (pp 191-2). The continued importance of the site is indicated by the presence there of a stone church, apparently with a settlement around it (Lynn forthcoming b), by the late eleventh century (AU sa 1090; trans MacAirt and MacNiocaill 1983:524-5), "The stone church of the Fert (*Damhliac na Ferta*) was burned, with a hundred houses round it". The significance of this site is presumably as St Patrick's first foundation at Armagh. However, Lynn (forthcoming b) suggests that the strong tradition surrounding the foundation of *Tempull na Ferta* may be an attempt at rationalization. By incorporating within Patrician hagiography the tradition of a very early and prominent ecclesiastical foundation which was located adjacent to St Patrick's own (alleged) foundation on Cathedral Hill, the hagiographers may have been denying the possibility of challenging St Patrick's position as the founder of the first church of Armagh and apostle of the Irish. The importance that this tradition should be maintained and, where possible, reinforced, is



that it constitutes the basis of Armagh's claim of ecclesiastical primacy over all Ireland (pp 345-7). According to Lynn's hypothesis, therefore, the original significance of *Tempull na Ferta* is now lost, and the significance which it is accorded in literary sources since the mid-seventh century is an historical gloss - a construction of the past - and a product of Armagh's ideological strategy aimed at securing ecclesiastical primacy. This is an attractive proposal, but one which is difficult, if not impossible, to substantiate.

*Temull na Ferta* is often referred to in the sources simply as *Na Ferta* and this suggests the presence there of a prehistoric funerary monument (Lynn forthcoming b; cf *Fert Conmhaoil*, p 142, above), perhaps supporting Lynn and McDowell's (1988a:59) interpretation of the significance of the site for an early ecclesiastical foundation. By the late seventh century, however, the name appears to have been glossed in the process of producing Patrician hagiography, so that Muirchu (trans Bieler 1979:108-9) writes of it in the present tense, "... where there is now the Burial-Ground of the Martyrs (*fertae martyrum*) beside Armagh ...".

*Tempull na Ferta* is depicted by Bartlett as comprising a roofless unicameral church, standing within an enclosure which is circular in plan, and located adjacent to the road which leads eastwards from the *dorus Ratha*. No traces of the church itself appear to have been found during excavation, although small finds indicated the close proximity of a Medieval ecclesiastical foundation and the foundations of a masonry building of Medieval date, which is presumed to be an ecclesiastical outbuilding, were found (Lynn and McDowell 1988a:60).

Although manifestly an important site, it is unclear how much the results of these excavations contribute to the understanding of the subject with which this chapter is concerned, the morphology of early historic Armagh. That there was, for instance, an early focus of Christian activity in addition to Cathedral Hill need not, it seems, have any repercussions for what is said in this and the following chapter about the layout and spatial organization of early historic Armagh. This is reinforced by the fact that *Tempull na Ferta* lay beyond the outer boundary and appears to have been regarded as a distinct ecclesiastical foundation, separate from the Church of Armagh.

#### The Nature and Identification of the Internal Divisions

As noted above (pp 259-60), the annals make a distinction between two spatially-discrete units within Armagh, the *Raith* and *Trian*: "*Trian* means a 'third portion'; but, like our 'quarter', it came to signify 'a district', without any reference to proportion" (Reeves 1860:19; cf Greene and Quin 1948: col 306; Paterson 1953:32, n 1). However, as the name suggests, the existence of three "thirds" is attested in the annals. These are *Trian Mór* ("Great Third") (AU sa 1008, 1092, 1112, 1170, 1173), *Trian Masain* ("perh[aps] means the 'hill division'" [Paterson 1953: 32, n 1]) (AU sa 1112, 1121) and *Trian Saxan* ("Saxon Third") (AU sa 1092). On the basis of analogy with the *Raith*, which is similarly recorded in eleventh and twelfth century annalistic entries but is also mentioned in the mid-seventh century *Liber angeli* (p 259), it is possible that these spatial units are also considerably older than their first appearance in the annals.



These divisions can be identified within Armagh from the churches and other structures which the annals locate within them and whose approximate positions are known from Medieval or later sources. For example, *Trián Saxan* is readily identified, because Abbey Street, which appears to fossilize the line of the northern part of the outer ecclesiastical boundary, is referred to as "Bor-ne Trián Sassenach", ie *Bothar na Trián Sassenagh*, "Street of the English Third" (Arthurs 1956: 35), in seventeenth century sources (Reeves 1860:19,27). The extent of *Trián Saxan* appears to be a discrete area within the modern city which is bounded by Abbey Street on the west and north, Upper English Street on the east, the north side of Market Street on the south, and the bottom of Cathedral Close and property boundaries on the south-west. *Trián Saxan*, it seems, comprised the north-eastern sector of the ecclesiastical settlement and within which the Abbey of St Peter and St Paul, which was consecrated sa 1126 (AFM sa 1126; AU sa 1126), was located (Reeves 1860:28-32).

An older foundation, the *Reiclesa Coluim Cille* (AU sa 1010; AFM sa 1152), which Reeves (1860:27) terms an "abbey church", may also have been located within *Trián Saxan*, although there is some doubt about this. In his map, Reeves marks the "Site of St Columba's" on the north side of Abbey Street, that is, apparently outside the boundary of the outer enclosure. In this, he appears to follow Rocque's map of 1760, which records "the place where St Columba's Church stood" in the same location. However, these annotations suggest that no remains of the church were visible by 1760 and that its location was reliant upon tradition. Of this location, Stuart (1819:26) states that "Many human skeletons were lately found in the rere of these premises, which was

used after the Reformation as a cemetery", although its post-Reformation date may suggest that the discovery of human skeletal remains there is of doubtful relevance to the site of the Church of Colum Cille. Reeves (1860:27) cites an inquisition of 1614 in which "... Templecollumkilly is mentioned as in the street called Bore-netrian-Sassenach, and a northern limit of the premises of St Peter and St Paul's Abbey. And again, on the east, 'the wall between the garden and Collumkilllye's Chapel', which I presume to have been the same as Templecolumkilly". All of this is rather ambiguous. As Reeves' own map demonstrates, if Colum Cille's church did lie on the "northern limit" of the lands of St Peter and St Paul's it could not have been located on "Bore-ne Trian Sassenach", because those lands extended north of the street, beyond the line of the outer ecclesiastical boundary (fig 11). In addition, Reeves depicts the "Orchard and Gardens" of St Peter's and St Paul's as lying to the south of Abbey Street, that is, within the area of the outer enclosure. If this is the garden mentioned by the inquisition of 1614 and which appears to have shared a common wall with "Columkilllye's Chapel", then this may suggest that Colum Cille's church lay within, rather than just outside, the outer enclosure. The significance of its location will become apparent in the next chapter (pp 341-3), but the most important - and seemingly undeniable - point is that this church lay on the north of the ecclesiastical settlement.

The evidence for the location of *Trian Masain* is not as sound as that for *Trian Saxan*, but it may still be identified with some confidence. The *Annals of Ulster* (sa 1121; trans MacAirt and MacNiocaill 1983:597) states that "Two stretches of *Trian Masain* from the *dhorus Ratha* ('gate of the *Raith*') to the *Crois mBrigte* ('cross of



[St] Brigit') were burned". As it is known that the (principal) entrance to the *Raith* lay on the eastern side of the enclosure (pp 252-3), on the line now preserved by Market Street, *Trián Masain* must have lain to the south of this street, on the opposite side of it from *Trián Saxan* (Reeves 1860:20). *Trián Masain* therefore occupied the south-eastern area of the outer enclosure.

This identification corresponds well with what is known about this area of the ecclesiastical settlement. The *reclesa Brigitte* ("Church of [St] Brigit") (AFM sa 1085; AU sa 1085; 1179 and 1189) can be located with the help of an inquisition of 1612 and Rocque's map of 1760 as within the south-eastern quadrant of the outer enclosure (Reeves 1860: 25-6). According to Reeves (1860:26), "In 1830, when... sinking foundations... in the rere of Chapel Lane, and hard by the chapel, quantities of skulls and other human bones were disinterred, indicating the site of an ancient cemetery". Reeves equates this with the cemetery of St Brigit's Church.

Having located *Trián Saxan* and *Trián Masain* within the ecclesiastical settlement, it is possible to identify the location of *Trián Mór* by a process of elimination. This is helpful, for although *Trián Mór* is mentioned more frequently in the annals than the other "thirds", these entries do not refer to any firmly located landmarks or buildings. *Trián Mór*, however, presumably comprised the western portion of the ecclesiastical settlement. This area is bounded by Upper Irish Street, the upper arms of Callan Street and the top part of Abbey Street on the east, by the eastern arm of Navan Street, Culdee Drive and property boundaries on the west, and formerly by Whalley's Lane on the north-west. As such, the area which it occupies is considerably greater

than those of the other two "thirds", which may account for its name. In fact, such is the extent of *Trián Mór* that it more realistically occupies half the area of the outer ecclesiastical enclosure, while *Trián Saxan* and *Trián Masain*, rather than thirds, are actually quarters. The significance of this will be assessed below (pp 285-7).

There is little information concerning any ecclesiastical structures within *Trián Mór*. An inquisition of 1614 mentions a stone building called "Templemurry", which appears to have been located in the north of *Trián Mór*, adjacent to "Borenefeighy", ie *Bothar na Faithche*, "the Street of the Green" (Arthurs 1956:34-5), which marked the boundary with *Trián Saxan* (Reeves 1860:31). Templemurry therefore lay within the area of the outer enclosure, most probably on, or adjacent to, the site presently occupied by the County Infirmary (ibid:32). It appears to have stood within its own enclosure (Arthurs 1956:35), part of the circuit of which may formerly have been fossilized in the eastern end of Whalley's Lane, which Rocque's map depicts as forming an arc around it (fig 11). Its east-west orientation suggests it to be a church, while its name appears to be derived from *Tempull Muire*, "Mary's Church". This seems a likely dedication, given the prominence of the cult of the Virgin Mary in early historic Ireland (O'Dwyer 1976) and that, according to the *Vita tripartita*, a relic of hers is alleged to have been kept in Armagh (trans Stokes 1887,1:239): "And a sheet was there with Christ's blood [thereon] and with the hair of Mary the Virgin".

The impression is gained that, despite its size, *Trián Mór* held fewer ecclesiastical foundations than the other two "thirds". This may be linked with the association in some annalsitic entries of a number of secular activities or events with *Trián Mór*, unlike the other "thirds",



and this may be why *Trián Mór* is mentioned more often in the annals than the other "thirds". For instance, two regicides are associated with the centre of *Trián Mór*. The *Annals of Ulster* (sa 1008; trans MacAirt and MacNiocaill 1983:439) record that "Maelan, ie of the large spear, king of Uí Dorthainn, was killed by the Cenél Eogain in the middle of *Trián Mór* (for *lar Trin Moir*) in Ard Macha as a result of a commotion of the two armies". In addition, Conchobar mac Muirchertach Ua Lochlainn, *rí Cenél nEógain* and *rigdoma Érenn* (ie a potential successor to the high-kingship of Ireland), was slain there sa 1170 (AU; trans MacCarthy 1893: 163): "Concobhar, son of Muirchertach Ua Lochlainn, king of Cenél-Eógain, royal heir of all Ireland, was killed by Aedh Mac Cana the Little and by the Uí-Caracaílín, Easter [Holy] Saturday [April 4], in the centre of the Great Third in Ard-Macha (*an lar Trin Moir i n-Ard-Macha*)".

Not only the same "third", but the same location within one "third", therefore, is apparently the scene of these two regicides. This may imply the presence of a spatial organization in terms of the loci of royal activity within the city. The specific association of kings with this "third" may suggest it to have had a more secular character, or function, than the apparently more ecclesiastical nature of *Trián Saxan* and *Trián Masain*. This is also suggested, for example, by the fact that *Trián Mór*, despite its size, is not recorded as having contained any churches. Although "Templemurry" appears to have lain on its northern boundary, the apparent fossilization of the boundary of its enclosure within the post-Medieval street-plan (p 280), may suggest it to have been quite discrete from *Trián Mór*. *Trián Mór*, therefore, may perhaps have been occupied by the residences of high status secular individuals

and it may have been here that the *domus* of Áed Findliath mac Néill, high-king of *Cenél nEógain*, was located (AU sa 869; trans MacAirt and MacNiocaill 1983:327): "Diarmait son of Diarmait killed a man in Ard Macha in front of the door of Áed, king of Temair (*ante ianuam domus Áedho regis Temhro*)". *Trián Mór*'s possible secular status may be the reason why it was the only "third" to be plundered sa 1173 (AU; trans MacCarthy 1893:177): "Great foray by Áedh Mac Oenghusa and by the Clann-Aedha, so that they pillaged the Great Third (in Ard-Macha)". The other "thirds", as possibly being more ecclesiastical in character and function, may have been considered either to be exempt from this treatment - although such considerations did not usually protect churches from attack (Lucas 1967) - or possibly irrelevant to whatever political motive(s) may have lain behind the attack.

In summary, the early historic ecclesiastical settlement appears to have occupied two, or possibly three, concentric enclosures, the inner (two?) of which appear(s) to correspond(s) to the *Raith* mentioned in the annals and may comprise the ancient core of the city. The three "thirds" which are attested in the annals are peripheral to the *Raith*, occupying between them the area of the outer enclosure, which may represent an expansion of the area of the original ecclesiastical settlement. This arrangement of the "thirds" is more feasible than that presented by Henry (1967: fig 2; fig 18, below), who locates *Trián Saxan* within the area of the outer enclosure, but depicts *Trián Masain* and *Trián Mór* as lying beyond its boundary. This does not appear to be what is suggested by the use of the term *Trián*, which implies a spatial sub-division of a larger entity, that entity presumably being the area delimited by the boundary of the outer enclosure (but see p 287 for an alternative



interpretation). Indeed, this is reinforced by the use of the phrase "*Raith* and *Trian*" to denote *all* Armagh (eg AU sa 1074; quoted on p 252).

However, what appears - initially at least - to upset the identification of the "thirds" is a reference in the *Vita tripartita* (trans Stokes 1887,1:237) to a fourth *trian*, *Trian Conchobair*: "Once upon a time Patrick's household were reaping a farm which they had made in *Trian Conchobair* ('Conor's third')". Although the *Vita tripartita*, like other Patrician hagiographical literature, is mythological in nature, this reference cannot be dismissed as irrelevant or fictional. Firstly, it occurs as incidental information which is without any apparent motive or propaganda value. Secondly, the name of this "third" is significant in a manner which suggests that it has not been arbitrarily coined (pp 337-8). Both these points suggest that *Trian Conchobair* should be accepted as constituting a fourth "third". Although the presence of a farm within the ecclesiastical settlement may seem rather odd, it is entirely consistent with the Rule of St Benedict (§66; trans MacDonald 1984:281), which was widely observed in early historic Ireland:

The monastery should, if possible, be so arranged that all necessary things, such as water, mill, garden, and various crafts may be within the enclosure, so that the monks may not be compelled to wander outside it, for that is not expedient for their souls.

If *Trian Conchobair* is accepted as a genuine spatial unit, then what was it, where was it located, and, more specifically, what implications does its existence have for the other "thirds" and the spatial organization of Armagh in general? There are three main alternatives. Firstly, *Trian Conchobair* may represent the earlier name of one of the "thirds" which is referred to by a different name in the annals. Alternatively, it could refer to a distinct spatial unit which

is simply not referred to in the annals. Thirdly, at a date subsequent to the composition of the *Vita tripartita* but prior to the recording of the relevant annalistic entries, *Trián Conchobair* may have been absorbed by one of the three annalistically-attested "thirds".

In the first possibility, the chronological gap between the date of composition of the *Vita tripartita* and the annalistic entries which mention the "thirds" may be significant. The *Vita tripartita* was written between 895 and 901, while the earliest annalistic reference to a "third" is sa 1008 (AU). This, however, is an isolated reference to *Trián Mór*, whereas the other references to the "thirds" by name all lie between sa 1092 and 1173 (AU). It is not until sa 1112 (AU) that all three "thirds" are mentioned by name, some two centuries after the reference to *Trián Conchobair*. In addition to this, however, the character of the *Vita tripartita*, which is set in the past, may suggest that it deliberately perpetuates archaisms, possibly including an archaic spatial organization, or toponymy, of the city.

There is a possibility that, during this period, the name of *Trián Conchobair* may have changed to one of those cited in the annals. *Trián Saxan*, which supposedly derives its name from the English clerics and students who came to study at Armagh (Paterson 1953:32), is perhaps unlikely to have been this district's earliest name and is suggestive of a later association. This is because the basis of Armagh's morphology seems to have been in existence as early as the mid-seventh century (p 350) - before Armagh's status and reputation began to attract students from overseas on any scale. However, Aldhelm, king of Northumbria, although primarily an exile rather than a student, studied in Armagh c 684, and said of Ireland, "... whither assemble the thronging students



by the fleet-load..." (trans Herren 1974:36). Nevertheless, it is possible that the north-eastern quarter of the ecclesiastical settlement was originally known as *Trián Conchobair* and a further point may be advanced in support of this (p 337-8).

There may also be a case for the second possibility, that *Trián Conchobair* was still in existence during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, but is simply not mentioned in the annals. This could be argued from the fact that of the other "thirds", *Trián Saxan* is mentioned only once (AU sa 1092) and *Trián Masain* twice (AU sa 1112, 1121). Once again, however, lack of evidence prevents this from being claimed with any degree of certainty.

The third possibility is attractive in that it corresponds neatly with what has been ascertained above about the spatial organization of early historic Armagh. This is that *Trián Mór*, whose large size in relation to *Trián Saxan* and *Trián Masain* is reflected in its name and has already been noted (p 280), actually occupies half the area of the outer enclosure, and therefore may represent what were originally two separate "thirds". This interpretation is supported by the topographical evidence. Examination of Rocque's map (fig 11) reveals that *Trián Mór*, the western area of the outer enclosure, does not constitute a single, unitary spatial unit, but rather two discrete areas. These are divided by the course of the Armagh end of Warner's (1986:7, no 8) possible "ancient road", "... running westwards from Armagh and skirting the southern edge of the enclosure [ie Navan Fort]". This road appears to be fossilized within the course of Callan Street, and not only divides *Trián Mór* into northern and southern halves but also comprises part of the boundary which divides Armagh itself into northern and southern

moieties (pp 333-5). That these two areas were still perceived to be discrete, even after their presumed union to form *Trián Mór*, is indicated by the use of the phrase "*an leth tuaiscertach do Triun mhor*" ("the northern half of *Trián Mór*") (AFM sa 1150; ed and trans O'Donovan 1856, 2:1090-1).

Although it is possible, therefore, that *Trián Conchobair* may have been one of the halves of *Trián Mór*, the preferred solution to this problem is that while *Trián Mór* may be identified as having originally comprised two spatially and cognitively discrete areas, it is as a precursor of *Trián Saxan* that the location of *Trián Conchobair* may be sought. In fact, regardless of the identification of *Trián Conchobair*, the morphology of the city indicates that prior to the eleventh or twelfth centuries the peripheral spatial organization of Armagh did not comprise thirds, but rather quarters. These are delineated by boundaries radiating from the central enclosure and which are fossilized within the modern street-plan, Market Street to the east, Vicars' Hill and Irish Street to the south, the main length of Callan Street to the west and the top of Abbey Street to the north. In its application to Armagh the term *trian* is possibly a later one.

It should be noted, however, that a couple of unresolved anomalies surrounding the "thirds" still exist. The *coiceda* are claimed (pp 63-68) to have originally been five in number, hence the origin of their name, regardless of the later transformations of the cosmological scheme to whose spatial units the term *coiced* was applied. In the case of Armagh, however, it is claimed that the spatial units originally numbered four peripheral areas, but that the collective term applied to them is the singular *trian*, "third". The use of this word is unresolved, but it does



not even appear to make sense within the context of the phrase "*raith 7 trian*" ("*Raith* and Third", ie all Armagh) (AU sa 1074; quoted on p 252, above). It does, however, make sense if one regards it as relating not to a radial but to a concentric sub-division of the ecclesiastical settlement. This is plausible if one accepts the argument for the existence of three, rather than two, ecclesiastical boundaries. The "third" may then denote the third concentric enclosed area, between the middle and outer boundaries, that is, outwith the *Raith*. This would correspond with the distinction which the *Liber angeli* makes between the *Raith* and the *suburbana* (ed Bieler 1979:184; p 259, above). If this was the case, then *Trian Saxan*, for example, would not denote "the Saxon third" but that part of the *Trian* which is associated with the Saxons. If this was the case - and it appears to be consistent with the use of the singular, *Trian* - then it is conceivable that the *Trian* was composed of more than three spatial sub-divisions. This would correspond with the evidence for the existence of a *Trian Conchobair* and the four-fold division of the outer enclosure which appears to be fossilized within the street-plan. Although one must be wary of entering a circular argument here, a four-fold sub-division may be said to be more likely on the grounds that a four-fold spatial organization appears to be the dominant scheme within early historic Irish cosmology (pp 332-43). Indeed, such a spatial organisation, four peripheral units with a central fifth, has already been encountered in the case of the *cóiceda* (pp 103-14).

This chapter has attempted, as far as is possible, to define the ecclesiastical topography of early historic Armagh from historical sources and the street-plan of the post-Medieval city. A detailed

analysis of potentially relevant archaeological evidence, the ditch excavated on Cathedral Hill (Brown and Harper 1985), indicates that this does not belong to the ecclesiastical enclosure but dates instead to the Iron Age and is associated with ritual activity (pp 231-48). This itself is of considerable interest and, as the hollow of the ditch appears to have been visible during the early historic period (p 229), of potential relevance to the choice of Cathedral Hill as an early ecclesiastical site (pp 191-3,256).

The primary objective of this chapter has been to determine the nature and extent of the spatial units which comprise the ecclesiastical settlement. This has hopefully demonstrated, firstly, that attempting to elucidate the morphology of early historic Armagh is a highly complex process and, secondly, that the ecclesiastical settlement exhibits a high degree of spatial organization. The symbolic and ideological significance of this spatial organization will be examined in the following chapter.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### COSMOLOGY, PRIMACY AND THE PAST: THE SPATIAL AND SYMBOLIC ORGANIZATION OF EARLY HISTORIC ARMAGH

Having considered the topography of early historic Armagh in the previous chapter, an analysis of the symbolic and ideological significance of its spatial organization, and the manner in which this drew on a constructed past, may now be attempted. In order to do this, the properties of boundaries, and the concepts and significance of cosmological reproduction and of the centre must be considered. The ritual status of boundaries will be examined first before going on to look at the wider context of Armagh's spatial organization, its cosmological nature and its political context and ideological implications.

#### Boundaries and their Ritual Status

Two principal types of boundary may be identified within early historic Armagh. One distinguishes an internal and enclosed area from an external and unenclosed space: what is within from what lies without. The other differentiates between internal areas which comprise part of a larger enclosed entity or space. Both impose, and are products of,

conceptual distinctions between areas, but boundaries distinguishing between external and internal areas also make a qualitative assessment. Access to the area enclosed can appear to be more exclusive than that to the space outside, so that under certain circumstances this area can be made to appear to be of superior status. Boundaries constitute an integral and important element of many religious sites because of their role in restricting access, but are of ambiguous status in that they may be transgressed. This ambiguous status also arises from their definition by physical markers which belong to neither of the spatial and cognitive categories which they seek to distinguish (Leach 1976:33-4):

In principle, a boundary has no dimension.... But if the boundary is to be marked on the ground the marker itself will take up space.... It is the nature of such markers of boundaries that they are ambiguous in implication and a source of conflict and anxiety.

A lucid analysis of the ritual significance of boundaries within an urban context may be found in Rykwert's (1976:97-162) study of the boundary rituals of ancient Rome.

Given the properties of boundaries, therefore, it is not surprising that the significance of the boundaries of early historic Irish ecclesiastical sites was manifold. The ecclesiastical boundary defined the extent of the *termonn* (Latin, *terminus*), the area of consecrated ground which was holy and legally belonged to the foundation. As a result of its sacred status, the *termonn* and the buildings within it were inviolable, in theory at least (but see Lucas 1967), and therefore (again theoretically) provided sanctuary, as Cogitosus (*Vita Sanctae Brigidae* §32; trans Picard, in Doherty 1985:56), writing in the mid-seventh century, testifies:

... in its [Kildare's] suburbs, the clear boundaries of which holy Brigit marked out herself, no human foe or charge of enemies is



feared. But it is a city of refuge, the safest among the external suburbs with all their fugitives in all the lands of the Irish.

Such boundaries would also have had a role in maintaining the ascetic environment which some monastic communities sought by excluding, perhaps symbolically rather than in reality, the outside world: "Some ascetics evidently saw the enclosure as shutting out the world, probably rather unsuccessfully unless, as we know sometimes happened, the ascetics occupied a separate enclosure within the main one or at a distance from it" (Hughes and Hamlin 1981:54). The *vallum* also defined the area within which the abbot could ensure the observation of monastic rules. *Sancti Columbanī Opera* (ed and trans Walker 1957:154-5) states the penalty to be incurred by monks who crossed the *vallum* without the permission of their superior: "... let him do penance... if he has gone outside the wall (*extra vallum*), that is, outside the bounds of the monastery (*extra sepe[m] monasteriī*)...".

The boundary of the *termonn* was usually marked physically by a *vallum monasteriī*, a feature which is mentioned in several literary sources. For example, the clerics of Clonmacnoise "*egressi valum monasteriī*" when they heard of St Colum Cille's approach (Adomnan 14a; trans Anderson and Anderson 1961:214-5). The *vallum* was normally an earthen bank and ditch or drystone wall, and a substantial (4.6 m wide by 2.8 m deep) rock-cut ditch has recently been excavated at Tullylish, Co Down (Ivens 1988b). However, a *vallum* could also comprise a timber palisade (pp 297,313) or perhaps even a hedge, though Adomnan (3a; trans Anderson and Anderson 1961:183), writing in the late seventh century, appears to use this in a figurative sense in his account of St Patrick's prophecy of St Colum Cille: "The fields of our two monasteries, mine and

his, will be separated by the width of one small hedge...". The use of a hedge as a boundary marker, though not perhaps as the *vallum monasterii* itself (pace Hughes and Hamlin 1981:55), is also mentioned by Giraldus Cambrensis (2:69) in his late twelfth century account of St Brigit's perpetual fire at Kildare. This account illustrates the type and extent of powers which boundaries may have been perceived to possess, and their association with anxieties (trans O'Meara 1982:82):

This fire is surrounded by a hedge which is circular and made of withies, and which no male may cross. And if by chance one does dare to enter - and some rash people have at times tried it - he does not escape the divine vengeance.

It is such physical boundary markers which appear to be referred to as the "*alma civilis globi... moenia*" ("protective walls of the town") and the "*urbana... moenia globi*" in the seventh century *Hisperica Famina* (ed and trans Herren 1974:88,99). In this and other cases, however, the *vallum*, as the physical manifestation of the boundary, was presumably regarded as a spiritual defence rather than protection against mundane threats. That the ecclesiastical boundary was perceived as a cognitive rather than a physical one is confirmed by Cogitosus' statement (932; trans Picard, in Doherty 1985:56) that Kildare "... is enclosed by no circle of walls", and yet possessed "... clear boundaries of which holy Brigit marked out herself...".

It seems likely that the boundaries of the ecclesiastical enclosures at Armagh were defined by a *vallum monasterii*, probably consisting of an earthen bank and ditch. This is implied by the name of one of the city's principal spatial units, the *Raith* (pp 192,251-3,257, 259-61), and its description as a *dún* in the *Vita tripartita* (ed Stokes 1887,1:253). Although *dún* may have a range of possible meanings, this is the terminology of the defended and fortified settlements of secular



elites (Flanagan 1981; cf pp 192,268, above). As Byrne and Joynt (1960: col 449) define the use of *dún*, it is, "... in O.Ir. usually applied to [the] residence of a chief or dignitary, consisting of an earthen (more rarely stone) rampart, inside which the house ('tech') or houses were erected...". Also, the former presence of prominent physical boundary markers at Armagh possibly may be inferred from the extent to which the lines of the ecclesiastical enclosures are fossilized in the street-plan of the modern city (pp 249-71), although this may also be a consequence of the conceptual distinction produced by the boundaries and their later significance as marking property boundaries (pp 254-5). However, the only example of an earthwork boundary marker found to date, the ditch on Cathedral Hill (Brown and Harper 1985), appears to belong not to an early ecclesiastical foundation, but to an earlier, Iron Age site of ritual activity (pp 231-48).

As features of such cognitive and ritual significance, it is likely that the delineation of ecclesiastical boundaries was itself circumscribed by ritual and was one of the first and most important acts undertaken in the foundation of an ecclesiastical site. It was presumably on this marked-out boundary that the *vallum* was constructed subsequently. Three sources give an insight on the form of such possible rituals. The first two, the *Vita tripartita* and the *Lebor brecc* homily on St Patrick are specific to Armagh and appear to be closely related. The former was written between 895 and 901 while the latter is preserved in an early fifteenth century manuscript, but is probably approximately coeval in composition with the *Vita tripartita*. Both give the mythological account of Daire's gift of the site of *Na Ferta* to

St Patrick (p 192) and include an account of the establishment of the ecclesiastical boundary. However, there is an element of ambiguity about these accounts because it is unclear whether they refer to *Na Ferta*, the granting of which to St Patrick is recounted earlier in the *Vita*, or to Cathedral Hill. The *Ferta* is mentioned by name, but that St Patrick himself measures out the *lis* ("enclosure") appears to contradict the statement in the *Vita tripartita* that he had been given a *ráith* ("fort, enclosure" [p 192]) by Daire. This is perhaps the type of inconsistency which may be expected in mythological - and that includes hagiographical - sources, and it should be noted that it is the cult of St Patrick rather than the saint himself which is associated with Armagh (p 190). However, this need not invalidate the account itself. Indeed, the inclusion of the description of the marking of the boundary of St Patrick's foundation in the sources probably indicates that it relates to a contemporary reality, either of actual or perceived foundation rituals. This is apparently corroborated by other evidence (pp 295-7).

The delineation of the boundary appears to have been effected by a ritual procession and possibly marked by an earthwork later (*Vita tripartita*; trans Stokes 1887, 1:231, 237):

... Patrick went with his elders and Daire with the magnates (*comaithib*) of *Airthir* besides, to the hill to mark it out, and to bless it, and to consecrate it.

The way in which Patrick measured the *ráith* was this - the angel before him and Patrick behind the angel; with his household and with Ireland's elders, and *Bachall Isu* in Patrick's hand; and he said that great would be the guerdon of him who should do God's will therein.

....

In this wise, then, Patrick measured the *Ferta*, namely, seven score feet in the enclosure (*lis*), and seven and twenty feet in the great house (*tig mór*, ie the main church), and seventeen feet in the kitchen (*chuli*), seven feet in the oratory (*aregal*); and in that wise it was that he used to found cloisters (*congála*) always.



The account in *Lebor brecc* (*Leabhar breac*) (trans Stokes 1887, 2:473, 475) is similar:

... Patrick beheld in a vision Victor, an angel, coming to him with Ireland's elders along with him, and they marked out the city (*cathraig*) in his presence, and the place of the church (*tempuil*) and of the kitchen (*cuicni*) and of the guest house (*tige aiged*). And he went *dessel* round the rampart? (*ráthai*), and Patrick behind him with his *Bachal Isu* in his hand, and Ireland's elders a-chanting around him.

These accounts may be modelled on an eighth century decree in book forty-four, "*De locis consecratis*", of the *Collectio canonum Hibernensis* (S44:3c; ed Wasserschleben 1885:175). This states that a *termonn* should be consecrated by king, bishop, and people: "*Tres personae consecrant terminum loci sancti, rex, episcopus, populus*". It may be argued, therefore, that although St Patrick is unlikely to have founded the Church of Armagh (Sharpe 1982; p 190, above), these sources accurately attest the manner in which it was *believed* to have been founded. As a result, these accounts probably describe the type of foundation rituals celebrated at the establishment of ecclesiastical sites in early historic Ireland or practised in the commemoration of these acts of foundation.

Supporting evidence for this form of foundation ritual comes from iconographic sources which are independent of Armagh. The first is a scene on the the north side of the base of the twelfth century St Tola's Cross at Dysert O'Dea, Co Clare. This depicts a procession of four clerics, the first of whom (an abbot?) is shown as walking, holding a *cambutta* or pastoral staff (usually, though incorrectly, referred to as a crozier) before him, with the central two driving a tau (T-headed) staff into the ground (Rynne 1967a: pl 14.2). This scene appears to represent the ritual delineation of an ecclesiastical boundary. The

depiction of a cleric with a cambutta, for instance, may be paralleled with the description of the procession of the *Bachal Ísu*, a staff shrine (on which see Reeves 1860:20; Crawford 1923:164, no 2), at Armagh (p 294). The use of the cambutta to define sacred boundaries is also suggested by those incidents (cited in Doherty 1985:57) in the hagiographical literature in which a saint marks a circle on the ground, defying anyone, on penalty of death, to cross its boundary. Tau crosses in any medium are rare in Ireland. However, it is notable that one of only two known stone examples, at Killinaboy, Co Clare, is believed to mark the boundary of a *termonn* (Westropp 1894:29-30; 1909; Buckley 1900:251; MacNamara 1900:22-9; Rynne 1967a:162). The association of tau staffs or crosses with ecclesiastical boundaries is of particular interest, given that the tau is traditionally held to be the symbol of St Anthony of Egypt (Post 1964:26), one of the founders of monastic ascetism.

That the practice of ritual foundation processions and the significance of the tau cross or staff is not unique to Ireland is suggested by an account of the foundation of the Abbey of Morimond, near Langres, in the Haute-Marne of France, c 1155 (Dubois 1879; trans Buckley 1900:248):

The abbot, holding a wooden crutch or cross staff in his hand, went forward in front of the brothers, diggers or wood-cutters, all reciting the Psalms. Having got to the place in the forest, or on the moorland, which had been given to them, the abbot planted his "cross" staff thereon, sprinkling the spot with holy water all around, and taking possession thereof, in the name of Christ. He then, accompanied by the brethren, went round the territory. If it were a forest, the abbot cut down a tree; if it were uncultivated land, he dug the first spade of its soil; his brethren immediately followed his example...

The description of this ritual appears to share some basic similarities with those hagiographical accounts of St Patrick's alleged foundation of



the Church of Armagh. That this form of foundation ritual is independently attested outside Ireland may indicate the veracity of the Irish sources, in that they describe a foundation ritual which shares features in common throughout western Christendom.

That the boundary was a feature of fundamental cognitive and religious significance is also suggested sources by the role ascribed to St Patrick in accounts of the foundation of the Church of Armagh. The founder of the church, in conjunction with an angel - the divine agent, acts as a mediator, or earthly representative, of divine power and effectively founds the site by means of the act of delineation, consecrating the area delimited, and establishing the sacred status of the ecclesiastical enclosure by a process of divine transformation. This founds the cognitive reality of the area enclosed in relation, or rather, in opposition, to the profane space which lies outwith the boundary (cf Eliade 1954a:1-20; 1959:20-36). This is emphasized by the procession of the *Bachal Ísu*, which, during the early historic and Medieval periods, was one of the most venerated of Patrician reliquaries. In a similar manner to St Patrick's alleged foundation of the Church of Armagh, St Brigit is claimed by Cogitosus to have defined the ecclesiastical boundary of Kildare (p 292), while, in *Betha Ciarain* (S4386), St Ciarán is portrayed as establishing the boundary of Clonmacnoise (trans Stokes 1890:276): "Then Ciarán planted the first stake in Cluain, and Diarmait, son of Cerball, was along with him".

Rituals of foundation or delineation, however, are not by themselves sufficient to maintain the sacral integrity of a boundary or the area which it encloses. As a consequence of the ambiguous, even indeterminate, nature of boundary markers (pp 289-90), the cognitive

significance of boundaries must be maintained or reinforced by other means. The archaeological record and historical sources appear to attest three principal methods by which this was done. One of these, the votive deposition of artefacts or other material on boundaries or within boundary markers, may be part of the wider practice of artefactual deposition which is attested throughout later prehistory (pp 4-6). An example of this has already been encountered in Armagh in the case of the faunal and human skeletal deposits from the Iron Age ditch on Cathedral Hill (pp 231-48). In this specific case the liminality of the ditch, constituting the threshold between the interior and exterior of the enclosure, may be paralleled by the liminality of those individuals whose remains are represented in the ditch. As dead ancestors, the mortuary rites to which their corpses were subjected - possibly including excarnation in some cases, and deposition - may constitute part of the process by which the dead are translated to the society of the dead and the society of the living is reconstituted after the dislocation of death (cf Huntington and Metcalf 1979:13-5).

The other means of maintaining the cognitive significance of boundaries are by the celebration of rituals (in addition to those of deposition) associated with boundaries, and the erection of physical signs, symbols or markers - such as crosses (pp 305-13) - on the line of, or adjacent to, boundaries. These appear to be associated. There is some circumstantial evidence to suggest that the ecclesiastical boundaries of early historic Armagh may have been associated with rituals. This evidence consists, firstly, of those accounts in the *Vita tripartita* and *Lebor brecc* of St Patrick's delineation of the boundary of Armagh (quoted on pp 294-5). This is portrayed as having taken the



form of a ritual procession and it is possible that the form of this procession, projected back in time to St Patrick's alleged foundation of the Church of Armagh, may have reflected actual boundary rituals in practice at the time of composition of these sources (ie the late ninth century) or before (p 295).

The other possible indicator of the performance of boundary rituals within Armagh is the form which the fossilized boundaries trace within the modern street plan. This is discussed in detail above (pp 249-71), but it is not pointed out there that the streets which are believed to perpetuate the course of the ecclesiastical boundaries appear to describe a circumambulatory route within the city. This appears to spiral out from the centre of the city, on the summit of Cathedral Hill, and now occupied by the cathedral, to encircle the entire ecclesiastical settlement. This route may now be traced.

Emerging from the west door of the cathedral, one may leave the graveyard via a flight of steps and a gateway in the graveyard wall a short distance to the south-west. This takes one outside the area of what appears to have been the innermost ecclesiastical enclosure (pp 265-71), whose western boundary is fossilized in Vicars' Hill (formerly known as Pound Hill). From this gateway, the route towards the left is today blocked a short distance to the south along Vicars' Hill by a drop in ground level, a set of iron railings and a gate. Turning to the right, therefore - the significance and necessity of which will be assessed below (pp 365-7) - takes one to the junction of Vicars' Hill, Abbey Street and Cathedral Close (formerly Church Lane). Turning right again takes one into Cathedral Close, which skirts the northern boundary of the graveyard before continuing eastwards for a short length and then

turning south. Following the right hand turn at the bottom of Cathedral Close, one emerges at the top of Market Street, at a point adjacent to where Reeves' (1860) map marks the location of a well. This probably may be identified with the Stone Cross Well (on which see Paterson 1955:190; pp 252-3, above), as it is located immediately uphill from where Reeves locates the Market Cross.

Continuing in a southerly direction, across the top of Market Street, leads one into Castle Street, which appears to fossilize the south-eastern portion of the boundary of what is interpreted here as the second or middle enclosure, the *Raith* (pp 249-53). Crossing one of the radial boundaries fossilized within the street-plan, Irish Street, at its junction with the lower part of Vicars' Hill, leads one into the southern arm of Callan Street, which perpetuates the south-western arc of the boundary of the *Raith*. From here, one may carry on westwards into the main length of Callan Street, which forms the eastern end of Warner's (1986:7) possible "ancient road", leading to Navan Fort. Alternatively, one may also reach this road by following those streets which appear to preserve the course of the outer ecclesiastical boundary and thus completing a further circuit of Cathedral Hill. To do this, one follows the outer arms of Callan Street northwards into Abbey Street and then around into Upper English Street, Thomas Street, Ogle Street, the south-western branch of Navan Street, and Culdee Drive (formerly Callan Street Lane, and New Street before that), thus leading into the main body of Callan Street, the possible "ancient road" to Navan Fort.

It must be emphasized that the evidence for the existence of this possible circumambulatory way, and, indeed, for the practice of boundary rituals within early historic Armagh, is circumstantial. Nevertheless,



it is suggestive and although there are no obvious Irish parallels, similar rituals may be cited from Medieval England.

The Cathedral Church of Old Sarum, Wiltshire, is an instructive parallel because it, like the Church of Armagh, lies within an earlier enclosure. The church, completed in 1092, lies within the north-western quadrant of a large Iron Age hillfort, the site of the city of Old Sarum, better known as the early nineteenth century "rotten borough". A remarkable insight into the nature of some of the rituals practised here is provided by the Consuetudinary of the Church of Sarum (ed Frere 1898). This dates to between 1173 and 1220, possibly c 1210, and takes the form of an interpretation, or extrapolation, of the *Institutio* of St Osmund, the founder of the church (Hope 1917:112-3).

The Consuetudinary describes many rituals which either incorporate or take the form of processions, around both the interior and exterior of the church. The Sunday procession, for example, linked every altar within the church (Hope 1917:117):

... the procession went out of the presbytery by the north doorway, and if there were altars in the north transept first turned thitherward to visit them. Then it faced round and went up the north aisle of the presbytery, across the east end by the ambulatory there, and down the south aisle, a pause being made in passing at each of the eastern altars for the priest to sprinkle it. The procession next visited the altars in the south transept, and continued its way down the south aisle, past the font (*per fontes*), which was apparently at the west end of the church, and then returning eastwards up the nave made a station before the rood that stood above the *pulpitum*. After the saying of the accustomed prayers and the bidding of the bedes, and the sprinkling of the nave altars, the procession passed on through the *pulpitum*, and the clerks resumed their places in quire, while the priest said a versicle and prayer at the quire step. Lastly, the priest with the other ministers went out to and sprinkled the cemetery of the canons, and said there the prayers for the dead.

It is notable that the direction of this procession involves a succession of right-hand turns, the circuit of the church thus being a

clockwise one. The proposed circumambulatory route within Armagh also describes a clockwise direction (on the symbolic significance of which see pp 365-7), and is perhaps more closely paralleled by some of the processional rituals around the ecclesiastical boundaries of the church of Old Sarum. The more interesting of these concern Rogation, the three-day festival before Ascension Day which was intended "... to invoke the blessing of God upon the crops..." (Hope 1917:125):

On Rogation Tuesday the procession issued forth from the church as before [ie from the south door, as on Rogation Monday], but with the banners called *leo* and *draco* preceding the other banners and the relics. From the church it went through the west gate of the city, and passing round its north side, arrived at another church. Here mass was sung, and then the procession entered the city again through the east gate, and so returned whence it set out.

On Rogation Wednesday the proceedings were done in reverse order. First the procession passed out of the city through the east gate to the church, where mass was sung, and then traversing the south side of the city, returned to the cathedral church through the west gate.

It seems, therefore, that the procesional circuit of Old Sarum was completed in two parts, the northern arc on the Tuesday, the southern on the Wednesday. Both, however, proceeded around Old Sarum - that is, the ramparts of the Iron Age fort - in a clockwise manner and, together, described a complete circumambulation.

These processions appear to culminate in that of Ascension Day itself (Hope 1917:125), when the procession: ... headed by the lion, the greater and lesser banners, and the dragon, and by the relics, went down the quire and nave, and out through the west door of the church. Then, turning to the north, it made a circuit of the whole church and precinct, and returned to the church as on Palm Sunday through the west door.

This, then, constitutes the complete, ritual, procession of the ecclesiastical boundary of the church of Old Sarum, the course of which appears to bear a fundamental resemblance to the postulated circumambulatory way at Armagh. In the case of Armagh it is easy to identify a



route which, rather than leading towards Navan Fort along the possible "ancient road", leads back to the west door of the cathedral, as at Old Sarum.

Possibly in a similar manner to the processional rituals recorded at Old Sarum, the postulated circumambulatory way within Armagh may be linked with boundary rites. The existence of a circumambulatory way presupposes the association of some form of motion with it. Given the prominence which the account of the ritual procession of delineation is accorded in later Patrician hagiography (pp 294-5), it may be suggested that the route is a manifestation of the ritual and cognitive significance of the ecclesiastical boundary. Although there is no unequivocal evidence for the practice of such a ritual at Armagh, a suggestive annalistic entry (AU sa 733; ed and trans MacAirt and MacNiocaill 1983:186-7) records the "*commotatio martirum Petir 7 Phoil 7 Phatraic ad legem perficiendam*" ("The bringing on tour of the relics of Peter, Paul and Patrick to fulfill the law "). Hughes (1966:167-8), however, translates *commotatio* as "circuit":

The promulgation of a saint's 'law' with its attendant tribute must have had a double effect: to encourage peace and to add to the wealth of the patron. It seems to have been customary, when the *cáin* was applied, to take round the relics of the saint for exhibition. The word which the Annals use for this custom is *commotatio*. When Patrick's law was effected in 734 the annalist notes the *commotatio* of the precious relics of Armagh; 'Circuit of the relics of Peter and Paul and Patrick to fulfill the law'. Sometimes the annals record a 'moving round' of the relics without mentioning any law.

Although the *commotatio* of relics is usually thought to have been around a district rather than an ecclesiastical foundation, this practice is still of importance to the present discussion because it indicates the existence of the *principle* of the procession of relics, in a rotary motion, in early historic Ireland. The *Annals of Ulster* (sa

818; ed and trans MacAirt and MacNiocaill 1983:276-7) also records that "At Ard Macha Whitsun [5 June] was not [publicly] celebrated nor the shrine taken on tour (*tucbail scríne*)...". Hennessy (1887:312, n 6) interprets this as a reference to "Some Whitsun ceremony, or procession, at Armagh, of which no notice occurs elsewhere...". In addition, it may be worth noting that the circuit of relics was also a feature of the processions at Old Sarum (p 302).

Clearer evidence of the occurrence of ritual processions within Armagh is contained in an appendix to the *Liber angeli* (trans Bieler 1979:191):

A Rule of Prayer: On every Sunday in Armagh, when going to the shrine of the martyrs (*ad sargifagum martyrum*) and returning from it, namely, "Domine clamaui ad te" to the end, "Ut quid Deus repulisti" to the end, and "Beati immaculati" to the end of the blessing, and the fifteen gradual psalms. The End.

The Book of Armagh (fol 21bb) contains the marginal gloss "*du ferti martair*" for "*ad sargifagum martyrum*", indicating that the site concerned may be identified as *Na Ferta* (Reeves 1860:48; on which see pp 272-6) and suggesting that the procession was between Cathedral Hill and *Na Ferta* (Lynn forthcoming b).

The Rogational processions recorded in the Consuetudinary of Sarum and the hypothetical procession at Armagh may be interpreted as boundary rituals. These appear to have concerned the periodic delineation of the boundary and the reaffirmation of the sanctity, security and status of both the boundary and the area enclosed within it. This was achieved through a repetition of the primordial and divine - and therefore perfect - act of creation, an anamnesis of the mythical construction as related in *Vita tripartita* (cf Eliade 1954a:4-10; 1959:32-6, 50-8; Rykwert 1976:90). Rykwert's (1976:152; cf Saintyves 1923; Wheatley 1971:



434) suggestion that the seven-fold circumambulation of cities in the ancient world was of protective value is of interest here, especially given the recurring seven-fold measurements and symbolism of St Patrick's foundation of Armagh as stated in *Vita tripartita* (p 294).

Of course, the validity of the analogy between the forms of circumambulatory ritual practised in Medieval England, as attested in the Consuetudinary of Sarum, and that proposed here as having been practised within early historic Armagh may be challenged. However, there is a direct link, albeit a late one, between the rituals practised at Old Sarum and in Ireland. One consequence of the English invasion of Ireland in 1169 was the Synod of Cashel, in 1172, at which the Celtic liturgy of the Irish Church was abandoned and the Sarum form of the Roman liturgy adopted. That this was accepted may suggest that aspects of the Sarum form of the Roman liturgy, possibly including individual rites, were already practised or were acceptably similar to rites practised in Ireland prior to 1172 (cf p 312-3). Certainly, the account of St Patrick's foundation of the Church of Armagh is suggestive of the practice of circumambulatory rituals in early historic Ireland. Indeed, such rites may have been practised throughout early Christendom and have been associated with boundary markers in particular. The nature and significance of the boundary markers of Armagh will now be considered.

#### The Boundary Markers of Armagh

The existence of the second means of maintaining or reinforcing the cognitive and symbolic significance of boundaries, by the employment of physical boundary markers - in the form of signs or symbols as opposed or in addition to linear features - is a widespread phenomenon (Rykwert

1976:115). In Ireland, it appears to be represented by sculptured crosses and especially the more elaborate high crosses which developed from the eighth or ninth centuries (on which see Henry 1964; 1967:133-94; Roe 1965; Edwards 1985). Prior to that, however, simpler cross-inscribed slabs or pillar stones (Crawford 1912a; 1913; 1916; Henry 1937; 1965:54-7; Higgins 1987) may have performed a similar function. Certainly, cross-slabs appear to have been located within early ecclesiastical enclosures in a formalized manner (Herity 1983b:256; cf Henry 1957:154-6; Herity 1984b:106; pp 206-7, above):

Carved pillars with three-dimensional cross designs in which the design is integrated with the shape of the pillar [are] known at Killaghtee, Glencolumbkille, Fahan Mura, Co Donegal, Caher Island, Co Mayo and Ardoilean, Co Galway...

Many of these cross-slabs appear to be sited according to definite rules within the enclosure. In Kerry, as at Killabuonia and Kilreelig, the slab was placed beside the founder saint's tomb with the cross facing the open space west of the tomb and oratory.

This is paralleled by the formalized siting of some of the earliest high crosses, although these particular examples do not appear to be associated with external boundaries (Herity 1984b:108):

About 12 m south and 4 m east of its [the *Daimhliag Mór* at Clonmacnoise's] present facade stands the South Cross... The same distance north, and similarly placed east of the facade of the church, is the so-called North Cross... One can envisage the west facade of the *Daimhliag* or its predecessor, about 800, as close to the line of these two decorated pillars which extended its facade by having their principal decorated faces looking on to an open space to the west...

These monuments may have replaced earlier cross-slabs of the western type, like those at Inishmurray. Alternatively, new canons of siting deriving from a separate High Cross tradition may have influenced their siting. The eighth-century Ahenny High Crosses... are sited close together north and south with their principal faces east and west, the base of a third cross to the east forms a triangle with them.

The *Collectio canonum Hibernensis* (S44.3 a,b; ed Wasserschleben 1885:175) states that a *termonn* must be marked clearly with crosses:

*"Terminus sancti loci habeat signa circa se... Ubicunque inveneritis*



*signum crucis Christi, ne laeseritis*". Indeed, high crosses have been recognised as boundary markers almost since the inception of their study (Lawlor 1897:175; Stokes 1898:x-xiv; Buckley 1900). Since then, however, the study of high crosses, and that of Irish sculpture and metalwork in general, has been dominated by art-historical approaches. It is these concerns with chronology, classification and iconography which characterize the work of Crawford (1907; 1908; 1918; 1926; 1927), Porter (1931), Henry (1964; 1965; 1967), Roe (1955; 1965) and Richardson (1984). This has been almost to the exclusion of the study of the social contexts and ritual and symbolic significance of high crosses. No one has adequately addressed the issue of what high crosses were actually for, although Henry (1980) has considered the political context and significance of the Cross of the Scriptures at Clonmacnoise. This, however, is not the occasion for analysing the socio-political context and implications of Irish high crosses. Instead, it is intended only to consider here the high crosses of Armagh and their ritual and symbolic significance within the morphology of the ecclesiastical settlement.

Since Buckley's (1900) article, "Notes on boundary crosses" - with its explicit association of boundaries and crosses - it is only recently that attention has again turned to the relationship between high crosses and ecclesiastical boundaries. These studies have included Herity's (1983b:270-7) review of the evidence for the location of high crosses around several ecclesiastical sites. However, Herity attempts little in the way of analysis, and the high crosses are not discussed within the context of the properties of boundaries. Both Doherty (1980:83) and Swan (1985:99-100) note the common association of a high cross located to the east of the principal church in the case of several foundations,

including Armagh, and the presence of later markets there. However, little has been said about the symbolic significance of high crosses, other than that they are associated in some apparently indefinable way with ecclesiastical boundaries.

At least five crosses within Armagh are mentioned in annalistic entries. From the manner in which these crosses are referred to, and the twelfth century date of the relevant entries, they may be assumed to be high crosses. However, fragments of only two high crosses survive. One, whose reassembled fragments now stand inside the cathedral (Crawford 1927:4-6; Roe 1955:109-10, pls 2 and 3; Henry 1964:29-30, pls 36-8) originally stood in Market Street, to the east of the cathedral (Stuart 1819:143,197,509; Henry 1967:154; pp 252-3, above). In addition to this, the base and broken shaft of another high cross stand beside the graveyard wall, to the south-west of the cathedral (Crawford 1927: fig 9; Roe 1955:108, pl 1; Henry 1967:42), although formerly this may have been located to the west of the cathedral's west door (pp 269-70).

The most important source concerning the high crosses of Armagh is the *Annals of Ulster* sa 1166 (ed and trans MacCarthy 1893:150-3):

Ard-Macha was burned... from the Cross of Colum-cille (*crois Choluim-cille*), the two streets to the Cross of Bishop Eógan (*crois espuic Eógain*) and from the cross of Bishop Eógan one of the two streets, up to the Cross of the door of the Close (*crois do-suir Ratha*) and all the Close (*Raith*) with its churches (*templaibh*) - except the monastery of [SS] Paul and Peter (*reclis Poil 7 Petair*) and a few of the houses besides - and a street towards the Close to the west (*Raith aníar*), - namely, from the Cross of [St] Sechnall (*crois Sechnaill*) to the Crosses of [St] Brigit (*crossa Brighti*) [was burned], except a little.

The significance of this entry is that it details the areas destroyed in this conflagration, which appears to have engulfed most of the city, with reference only to the crosses and some unnamed streets. This implies not only that the high crosses were important landmarks within



Armagh (Hamlin 1987:138), but also that they signified major cognitive divisions within the city. In short, this entry suggests that the high crosses of Armagh were boundary markers, a medium through which the sacred geography of the city could be described and known. An attempt will now be made to determine the nature of the relationship between these high crosses and the boundaries, external and internal, of early historic Armagh.

The absence of references to any of the "thirds", or any other spatial units within the ecclesiastical settlement, makes the task of locating the positions of the high crosses mentioned in this entry (AU sa 1166) more difficult. However, most can still be provenanced with varying degrees of confidence. The *crois do-suir ratha*, for instance, may be identified with the high cross which formerly stood in Market Street (pp 252-3). This is depicted in Bartlett's and Rocque's maps as standing in front of the entrance to, and outside, the second line of enclosure, that of the *Raith* (figs 11 and 14).

The *crois do-suir ratha*, therefore, may be used as a point of reference from which the other high crosses can be located. In addition, the *Annals of Ulster* (sa 1121; trans MacAirt and MacNiocaill 1983:567) states that "Two stretches of *Trián Masan*, from the gate of the *raith* (*dhórus Ratha*) to the the cross of Brigit (*crois mBrigte*), were burned". This entry indicates that the *crois mBrigte* was located in *Trián Masain*, the south-eastern quarter of the city (p 279). As the *dhórus Ratha* lies on the north-eastern boundary of *Trián Masain*, where it abuts *Trián Saxan*, this entry may imply that the *crois mBrigte* was situated on the opposite boundary of *Trián Masain*. This would be on the south-west, where it abuts *Trián Mór*. The *Crois mBrigte* may have stood somewhere on

the line of the present Irish Street, perhaps at, or near, its junction with Castle Street, if it had a similar relationship to the middle *vallum* as the *crois do-suir ratha* appears to have had. *Trián Masain* is the district in which St Brigit's Church was located, although it is apparent that the church and the cross dedicated to St Brigit did not share the same site (AU sa 1189; trans MacCarthy 1893:217), "Ard-Macha was burned from the Crosses of Brigit (*chrosa[ibh] Brighti*) to the Regular church of Brigit (*reicles Brighti*), both Close (*Raith*) and Third (*Trián*) and church (*tempul*)". This entry, as well as the one cited above (AU sa 1166; p 308) actually mentions the *chrosa[ibh] Brighti*, in the plural. The significance of the existence of more than one high cross dedicated to St Brigit is unclear, but it is possible that the dedication was borne, not by a single high cross, but by a number of crosses which stood along, or around, a boundary.

The association between the *crois Brighti* and the "third" in which the church dedicated to St Brigit was located suggests that the *crois Choluim Cille* may have stood in the same "third" as the *reicles Choluim Cille*. This church lay in the north of the city and a case is made for its location within *Trián Saxan* (pp 277-8). It is difficult to be any more precise about the position of the *crois Choluim Cille* than this. If the association of the *crois Choluim Cille* with *Trián Saxan* is accepted, then it seems likely that the *crois espuic Eógain* stood between it and the *crois do-suir ratha*, and, therefore, in the same "third". This may suggest that the *crois Choluim Cille* lay towards the west of *Trián Saxan* and it is tempting to see it as having stood on the western boundary of this "third", with the *crois espuic Eógain* located at an intermediate point between it and the *crois do-suir ratha*.



This only leaves the location of the *crois Sechnaill* to contend with. Henry (1967:42) suggests that the cross base and stump which now stands against the graveyard wall to the south-west of the cathedral are the remains of the *crois Sechnaill*, but this seems uncertain. In the entry sa 1166 (AU; quoted on p 308), the context in which the *crois Sechnaill* is mentioned suggests that it lay to the west of the *chrosaibh* *Brighti*, and that between them ran the *sreith fri Raith aníar* ("the street towards the *Raith* to the west"). *Rath aníar* is more likely to refer to the western part of the *Raith*. This is the spatially-discrete, semi-circular area which is defined by the boundary of the *Raith* (fossilized in the upper arms of Callan Street) on the west, and by the western boundary of the proposed central enclosure (preserved in the graveyard wall) and a length of the proposed circumambulatory way and radial boundary (perpetuated in Vicars' Hill) on the east. This may be the area which is referred to as "*An leth iarthasach do raith*" ("the western half of the *Raith*") (AFM sa 1091; ed and trans O'Donovan 1856,2: 940-1). The *crois Sechnaill*, therefore, may have lain on the same boundary as the *chrosaibh* *Brighti*.

Before attempting to analyze the significance of their locations, two points regarding the high crosses may be made. Firstly, even though there is some doubt over their precise locations, it is apparent that the high crosses were widely distributed around the ecclesiastical settlement. Those crosses which can be provenanced more accurately appear to have been located at the junctions of both radial (internal) and concentric (external) boundaries, that is, boundaries between the "thirds", and the boundaries of the ecclesiastical enclosures. Although this can only be demonstrated in the case of the *crois do-suir ratha* and

possibly the base and stump of the high cross which now stands adjacent to the wall of the cathedral graveyard, it seems possible that at least some of the other crosses were located in such positions. One possible exception to this is the *crois espuic Eógain*, but its significance may be that it was possibly located on an intermediate cardinal point (north-east?) (pp 310,321-2).

Secondly, there is no reason to believe that all the high crosses of early historic Armagh are attested in the literary sources or the archaeological record. In this context, it is notable that the high cross whose remains are situated next to the graveyard wall does not appear to correspond to any of the crosses mentioned in the annals, although, if it did originally stand to the west of the cathedral's west door (pp 269,308), then it could conceivably be the "*chroiss in-dorus tigi Patraic*" which is mentioned in the *Vita tripartita* (ed Stokes 1887, 1:236-7; p 319, below). Those crosses which are mentioned in the annals, however, may have been the most important, in the sense that they seem to have stood on the major cognitive boundaries of the ecclesiastical settlement.

The processional ritual(s) which may have been associated with the postulated circumambulatory way may be linked with the location and ritual significance of the high crosses. Of possible relevance here is the Anglo-Saxon consecration ritual formulated by Theodore of Canterbury in the seventh century. This involved the circumambulation not only of twelve crosses around the interior of a church, but also a progression around twelve crosses on the exterior of the walls (Smith et al 1976: 21). As Theodore came from the eastern Mediterranean, the ritual which he introduced was probably based on one practised within the eastern



church or a more archaic one practised, or formerly practised, within Christendom generally. Certainly, processional rituals were widely practised within the Byzantine church (Janin 1966). It is possible that an analogous type of ritual was practised in early historic Ireland, especially as the Irish liturgy is reputed to have been derived from that practised by eastern ascetics (Hughes 1966:72). Within an Irish context, the stations observed on the route of the circumambulation may not have been consecration crosses on the exterior walls of the church, but, instead, free-standing crosses around the boundary of the *termonn*.

It is against this background that the significance of the scene on the base of St Tola's Cross at Dysert O'Dea (pp 295-6) may be appreciated. Not only does this cross appear to serve as a boundary marker, and therefore may have acted as a station on a processional route, but, in addition, the scene on its base refers to the primordial delineation and consecration of the ecclesiastical boundary. St Tola is depicted on the cross as holding his *cambutta* (Porter 1931: fig 87) and it is likely that St Tola's "Crozier" (Westropp 1894:339-40; Coffey 1910:61; Crawford 1923:164-5; Stokes 1928:81; Mahr 1932: pls 40.5,92; Raftery 1941:158), which appears to have been the principal relic of this community, was employed in these rites. In a similar vein, a scene on the Cross of the Scriptures at Clonmacnoise depicts St Ciarán planting the first stake of the ecclesiastical boundary there (Henry 1967: pl 92) and this is also related in *Betha Ciarain*. These high crosses, and perhaps high crosses in general, may be accorded the status of monuments. They refer to the past and make a specific statement about the past - that the sanctity and status of the foundation, in terms of

its foundation by a prominent saint, is firmly rooted in - indeed, is a product of - the past.

Although there are no literary references to the celebration of a processional boundary ritual in Armagh, the evidence of the hagiographical accounts of the divine consecration (pp 294-5), the location of the high crosses, the *commotatio martirum* (pp 303-4) and the possible existence of a circumambulatory way is suggestive of the existence of such a ritual. This presumably incorporated something analogous to the stations of the cross and was performed at the high crosses around the ecclesiastical boundary. Relics played an important role in many early Christian rituals (Herrman-Mascard 1975; Van Dam 1985:177-300), including those in Ireland (Doherty 1984). Cambutta were essentially staff-shrines for the preservation of relics (Mahr 1932:59). The earliest known examples of these, however, belong to the eighth and ninth centuries (Bourke 1987), long after the foundation of the Church of Armagh. The hagiographical account of the procession of the *Bachal Ísu* may reflect the significance which was invested in relics in the late ninth century and their role in the commemoration of St Patrick's (alleged) foundation of the Church of Armagh and the confirmation of its boundary. As one of the principal Patrician relics, the procession of the *Bachal Ísu* constituted an explicit link with the past (that is, a constructed past) and with Armagh's (alleged) founder.

The physical representation of cognitive boundaries means that such markers are of ambiguous status (pp 289-90). Consequently, they are symbolically "dangerous" and, as a result, are circumscribed by proscription and taboo. Boundary rituals, therefore, are acts of lustration - of ritual purification. This may be reflected in chapter



one, "*De consecratione loci*, of the *Collectio canonum Hibernensis* (S44.8; ed Wasserschleben 1885:176-7; trans MacDonald 1984:294): "*In Apocalipsin: Cantabitur alleluia per civitatem et vicos ejus et plateas, et postea dicitur: Omnis immundos non transibit per eam*" ("Alleluia will be sung throughout the city and its streets and squares(?), and then it is said: no one unclean will pass through it"). In these rituals, the purification of the ecclesiastical settlement may be accomplished by a periodic return to a primordial chaos. From this, order is restored by the re-enactment of the church's or monastery's mythological foundation, the chief element of which is the delineation of its boundary (cf Rykwert 1976:93-6).

One of the ways in which the re-enactment of the delineation of the boundary may have been practised is in the recutting of a ditch which marks a boundary. As a result of the ambiguous status of boundaries and the symbolically "dangerous" associations of boundary markers (pp 289-90), boundary markers must either be kept clean, or be cleaned periodically in order for them to maintain the classificatory system - within and without, sacred and profane - which they embody (Leach 1976:61). For example, sequences of multiple recuttings are evident within the ditches of a number of Neolithic causewayed enclosures in southern England, such as Hambledon Hill, Dorset (Mercer 1980:64-5). Of greater pertinence to the present study, "... what may have been a localized re-cutting and silting up... (represented in tr. 2 by layers (9) and (11a))..." is detectable within the fill of the Iron Age ditch on Cathedral Hill (Brown and Harper 1985:116), cutting the deliberate infill of the phase two deposits (on which see p 224; fig 17). It may also be significant that, when Archbishop Mael Padraig Ua Sgannail built St Patrick's

Cathedral, a ditch was also dug (AU sa 1264; quoted on p 364). This act may have been associated with reinforcing the sanctity of the site and its links with the past, and possibly operating in a similar manner to the primordial referents of processional rituals (pp 364-5). Another component which is likely to have been of importance is the re-enactment of the actual procession of delineation. Given the prominence in Patrician hagiography of the procession which delineated the boundary at the foundation of the Church of Armagh (pp 294-5), this may be what the postulated circumambulatory way within Armagh re-enacts (pp 304,314-5). In this manner, the ritual dissolution and reconstitution of the religious community achieves the re-purification and re-sanctification of the ecclesiastical boundaries and the sacred precincts which they enclose.

#### The Ideal City: the Orientation of Armagh

If the physical manifestations of boundaries are of ambiguous status (pp 289-90), then the points of ingress or egress through them are of even greater ambiguity. These points constitute gaps in the boundary marker and are therefore distinct from it, but at the same time belong to neither the area which lies within the boundary nor the space which lies outwith it. Even more so than boundary markers themselves, they fall into no clearly definable spatial or conceptual category. To compound this, they are foci of human activity and attention, because of the necessity of access to and from an enclosure. As a result, entrances are critical points on boundaries and are circumscribed by ritual, proscription and taboo to an even greater extent than boundaries themselves (cf Rykwert 1976:137).



The ritual and symbolic significance of entrances is likely to be manifested in a number of ways, one of the most readily identifiable of which is by structural means. The erection of a gate or gateway at an entrance has the effect of emphasizing the location and special status of the entrance, but also may be used to restrict access to an enclosure. As a result, gates are of great importance to socio-political and ritual elites and, in the cities, temples, castles, palaces and churches of many cultures, are often highly elaborate structures.

That the very act of entering through a gateway, that is, crossing a boundary, constituted a ritual or symbolic act in Christian belief seems clear (St John 10:1-3,9):

Verily, verily, I say unto you, he that entereth not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber.

But he that entereth in by the door is the shepherd of the sheep.

....

I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture.

This emphasizes the symbolism of the act of entering through a door as an act of covenant with those inside the enclosure (Rykwert 1976:135, 139). The significance of the act of entering a church, a "house of God", therefore, may be appreciated in terms of the ingressor's communion with God and his or her acceptance of the spiritual and earthly powers of God's intercessors on earth, the Church. The symbolism of this appears to be analogous to that within a secular context of entering a king's house or fort, which constitutes a symbolic act of submission and acceptance of the king's authority (on which see Binchy 1970:31; Byrne 1973:124; cf p 140, above).

Gateways may have played a prominent role within Irish ecclesiastical settlements during the early historic period, although

better evidence of the symbolic significance of church doorways comes from Romanesque and later examples of the Medieval period. The significance of the latter is reflected not only in the archaeological record, for example, the elaborate Romanesque doorway of Clonfert Cathedral, Co Galway (Crawford 1912b; Leask 1955:137; Harbison 1970:89), but also in annalistic references to the construction of new doors and doorways (eg AU sa 1155; trans MacCarthy 1893:129), "The door of the church of Dáire (*tempaill Dáire*) was made by the successor of Columcille...". In the case of Medieval ecclesiastical enclosures, the significance of entrances sometimes appears to have been expressed in the form of elaborate gateway structures. The twelfth century gateway at Inchcleraun, Co Longford (Leask 1955:13) and the fortified gateway at Glendalough, Co Wicklow, (Leask nd:30-2) are the only ones of which any traces survive. The latter is no later than the early eleventh century (Henry 1967:45) and is located on the north-east of the outer enclosure. According to early Ordnance Survey maps, a high cross known as the Market Cross formerly stood directly outside the gate (Swan 1985:99), while the west wall of the gateway incorporates a large cross-inscribed slab in its fabric. The later (probably twelfth century) *Vita Sancti Coemgeni*, mentions a "... lapideum titulum Dei auxilio huc usque in memoriam uirtutis ligatum" (ed Plummer 1910,1:245). Although these examples belong to a later period, given the importance of boundaries around early historic ecclesiastical sites, it seems possible that gateways - whether stone built or more probably of wood - existed during the early historic period.

There is no archaeological evidence for any gate structure at Armagh, but the reference to the *dhorus Ratha* (AU sa 1121; quoted on p



309, above) may suggest that at least one did exist. The relationship between the *dhorus Ratha* and the *crois do-suir Ratha*, as implied by their names and depicted in Bartlett's map (pp 252-3; fig 14) is of great interest because it demonstrates the association of a high cross not only with a boundary, but also with an entrance and its gateway. The *Vita tripartita* (ed Stokes 1887,1:236-7), in mentioning a "*chroiss in-dorus tigi Patraic*", reveals a similar relationship between a (high?) cross and the door of Armagh's principal church (ie that dedicated to St Patrick). As well as at Armagh and Glendalough, this relationship between a high cross and an entrance to an ecclesiastical enclosure is also found at Kells (Swan 1985:99). These would appear to be the surviving examples of what was originally a more common relationship, and one which must be regarded as significant.

The importance attached to gateways in early historic Ireland may also be reflected in *Saltair na rann* (Psalter of the Quatrains) (ed Stokes 1883), a compilation of canonical and apocryphal tales which dates to between 870 and 900 (O'Dwyer 1981:165) and exhibits a strong concern with cosmology (Carey 1985). The second canto of this source contains a passage which, though obscure, evidently concerns the arrangement of the doors, gateways and guard chambers of the celestial city (Carey 1986:97-9), which "... is based on Ezekial's account of the outer portal of the Temple in Jerusalem" (ibid:99).

Throughout the classical world, the near east and the far east, city gates were often adorned with representations of ancestors, deities, heroes or mythical creatures. These were believed to protect those areas of ambiguity and conflict, boundaries and entrances, and safeguard the city and its inhabitants from external forces of evil and

chaos (cf Rykwert 1976:142). Gates and gateways, therefore, were considered to be sacred (Moholy-Nagy 1968:96; Wheatley 1971:435; Rykwert 1976:137,139). The gates of many Christian religious centres and cities in Medieval Europe were also considered to be holy, but were dedicated to the Christian equivalent of heroes - saints and bishops (Van Damm 1985:231). As some of Armagh's high crosses were dedicated to saints (St Brigit and St Colum Cille) and at least one to a bishop (Bishop Eogain) and others (the Market Cross, and possibly the cross whose base and stump now stands to the south-west of the cathedral's west door) were associated with gateways in the ecclesiastical boundaries, they may have been invested with a symbolic significance analogous to that of the elaborate gateways of Medieval cities. It is possible that high crosses performed a similar function, not only in sanctifying the ecclesiastical enclosure and its boundaries, but also blessing and ensuring the protection of the foundation inhabitants.

It is of interest that the eastern entrance at Armagh and several other ecclesiastical sites appears to have been accorded particular significance. This is reflected in their association with a high cross and the later development of markets around those crosses (Doherty 1980: 83; Swan 1985:99). As a result, the street leading eastwards from the church or cathedral in several towns or cities which occupy early ecclesiastical sites, including Armagh (ie Market Street), Kells, Lusk and Downpatrick, is often one of the most prominent. This may indicate that the east gate of ecclesiastical settlements was of special, and possibly superior, status. This may have been because it faced Jerusalem, and may also reflect Judaeo-Christian tradition concerning



the sanctity and pre-eminence of this gate (Ezekial 44:1-2; cf Ezekial 10:19; 11:1; 40:6):

Then he brought me back the way of the gate of the outward sanctuary which looketh toward the east; and it was shut.

Then said the Lord unto me; This gate shall be shut, it shall not be opened, and no man shall enter in by it; because the Lord... hath entered in by it...

In Armagh, the prominence of the street leading eastwards is emphasized by its incorporation within the east-west boundary which divides the settlement into northern and southern halves (pp 333-5).

In addition to the eastern entrance, the positions of other points of ingress and egress to and from the ecclesiastical enclosures of early historic Armagh may be identified from the post-Medieval street plan of the city. As this appears to fossilize the major external boundaries and internal divisions of the ecclesiastical settlement (pp 249-60, 265-71, 276-87), it seems that the gates would have lain on the streets which radiate from Cathedral Hill and cross the boundary of the outer enclosure. These routes, Market Street on the east, Upper Irish Street on the south, Callan Street on the west, and Abbey Street/Dawson Street on the north, also mark the internal boundaries within the enclosure, that is, between the quarters of the outer enclosure. The high crosses which may have stood on these lines, therefore, possibly performed the role not only of marking the ecclesiastical boundary and the gates through it, thus sanctifying and safeguarding the foundation and its community, but also of formalising the internal boundaries within the enclosures.

The names of the crosses may also suggest that the gates at which they appear to have stood and/or the boundaries on which they were located, were dedicated to saints. Thus, according to the interpretation

above, St Brigit's cross stood on the south, St Colum Cille's on the north, and St Sechnaill's on the west. In this respect, the *crois espuic Eógain* is of interest because it is dedicated to a prominent ecclesiastic, a bishop of *Ard Sratha* (Ardstraw, Co Donegal) and allegedly a contemporary of St Patrick, rather than a saint. Possibly as a consequence of its dedication and lesser status, this cross does not appear to have been located on a cardinal point, apparently unlike those crosses dedicated to saints, but on an intermediate point (pp 310,312). That the *crois do-suir Ratha* was not dedicated to a saint, or is not referred to by a dedication, again suggests the cognitive and symbolic pre-eminence of the entrance in front of which it stood and from which it derived its name.

One source which is commonly believed to depict the plan of an ecclesiastical foundation with several high crosses around its boundary is the colophon drawing in the eighth or ninth century Book of Mulling (Norman and St Joseph 1969: pl 56; Nees 1983: pl 1; fig 20, below). The drawing consists of two closely-set concentric circles, inside and around which are several cross symbols, most of which are labelled in the form "Cross of...". The three crosses in the interior of the circle are labelled "Christ with his apostles", "... [illegible]... with gifts", and "... [illegible]... with angels from above". A solitary cross in the area between the two circles is denoted as the "Cross of the holy spirit". The distribution of these crosses is apparently irregular, although all are sited close to the boundaries of the circles.

The external crosses, however, display a highly structured distribution. This appears to be related to the cardinal points, which



are marked around the exterior of the outer circle. These eight external crosses are grouped in pairs, the outer ones being labelled (from the north east) as the crosses of the four Evangelists, Luke, Mark, Matthew and John, and inside them (also from the north-east), crosses dedicated to the four great prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel and Ezechial. From the directions marked on the illustration, it is clear that the crosses are deliberately associated with the intermediate cardinal points.

This drawing is usually interpreted as a plan of an Irish ecclesiastical enclosure, probably that of St Mullins, and is used to demonstrate the siting of high crosses around ecclesiastical boundaries (eg Lawlor 1897:167-85; Bieler 1963:31; Henry 1964:19-20; 1965:81,134-6; 1967:205, n 1; Hughes 1966:149; Thomas 1971:39). Nees (1983) rightly urges caution of the uncritical acceptance of this drawing as the plan of an ecclesiastical enclosure and notes (p 74) that the naming of crosses after the evangelists and prophets is unknown in Ireland. However, what he fails to appreciate is that the emphasis on orientation is readily paralleled on several sites, including Armagh.

The background to the Book of Mulling illustration probably lies in the continental manuscript tradition of the ideal city, St John the Divine's Heavenly Jerusalem of the Apocalypse (Revelation 21:10-27). In form, of course, the Book of Mulling drawing is radically different from John's description of Jerusalem, which is square in plan. However, the drawing bears several similarities with continental illustrations of the Heavenly Jerusalem (cf Rosenau 1959:24,26-7, pls 3b,5b,6b). The Book of Mulling drawing appears to represent the celestial city as seen from an Irish perspective. As a result, it is circular in plan, instead of square, and emphasizes the positions and dedications of high crosses

rather than, as in the description in Revelation, the gateways. This interpretation also accounts for the fact that the crosses are not dedicated to Irish saints. In addition to the Book of Mulling drawing, the influence of the concept of the ideal city and the description of the Heavenly Jerusalem appears to be evident in the *Hisperica famina* (ed and trans Herren 1974), a difficult and obscure treatise probably dating to the mid-seventh century (ibid:36-7). The description of a church, *De oratorio* (ed and trans ibid:108-9), with its square plan, steeples (towers?) at the corners, and central altar, appears to owe much to the description in Revelation. The spirit of the Heavenly Jerusalem, however, is stronger in the description of the celestial city in the second canto of *Saltair na rann* (Carey 1986). The city is described as being enclosed by three walls and having "a long path of four chief doors", each of which has a gold cross and around which an archangel and his retinue sing hymns daily (ibid:87). Doherty (1985:46-60) gives a wider consideration of the concept of the celestial city in early historic Ireland.

Irish interest in Jerusalem is not only expressed in the form of obscure cosmological tracts. Most notably, Adomnan, abbot of Iona, though known primarily for his *Vita Columbae*, is also the author of a work, *De locis sanctis* (ed and trans Meehan 1958), which is primarily concerned with the Christian architecture of the Holy Land. This includes not only a description, but also a plan, of the Anastasis, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Once again, the emphasis is on boundary markers and gateways (II.3; trans ibid:43,45):

... this extremely large church, all of stone, and shaped to wondrous roundness on every side, rises up from its foundations in three walls. Between each two walls there is a broad passage, and three altars too are in three skilfully constructed places of the centre wall. Twelve stone columns of wondrous magnitude support



this round and lofty church, where are the altars mentioned, one looking south, the second north, the third towards the west. There are two fourfold portals ([four] entrances that is), which cut across the three solid walls facing one another with passageways in between.

Despite the fact that the Heavenly Jerusalem of the Apocalypse is very different in form from that of Irish ecclesiastical foundations, they both embody common concerns and exhibit similar features. In the case of Armagh, these are represented by the form of the ecclesiastical settlement and its foundation myth. Thus, both the Heavenly Jerusalem and Armagh are located and founded through the intercession of divine agency - their sites are revealed to saints by angels (cf Rykwert 1976: 44,90). Indeed, in the *Collectio canonum Hibernensis* (S44.2f; ed Wasserschleben 1885:174; trans MacDonald 1984:294), *De debito termino circa omnem locum sanctum* makes an explicit reference to the celestial city which is described in Ezekial (40-44, especially 40:3; cf Rev 11:1-2; 21:15; Ezek 42:15-20; Zech 2:1): "*Item Ezechiel: Vidi angelum habentem arundinem in manu, ut metiret civitatem in circuitu et plateas ejus foras*" ("I saw an angel having a measuring-rod in his hand that he might measure the city in circuit and its courts (?) without"). Both sacred cities are located on hills - as is the city described in Ezekial (40:2) - and in each case the physical expression of the city boundaries and the gates through them are of great symbolic and ritual significance. Given these close parallels, it scarcely seems surprising that Muirchu (SII 1.; ed and trans Bieler 1979:114-5) explicitly states that St Patrick recited daily from the Revelation of St John the Divine: "He [Patrick] used to recite daily all the psalms and hymns and the Revelation of John (*Apocalipsin Iohannis*)... whether he was staying in

one place or travelling". The same source is also cited in the *Collectio canonum Hibernensis* (44:2g; ed Wasserschleben 1885:175).

Perhaps above all, however, both cities display a great concern with orientation. In the case of Jerusalem, three gates face each cardinal point (Revelation 21:13), indicating that the city walls, indeed, the whole city, was orientated in space. This theme is also present in some of the Irish topographical literature, as in one of the *dindshenchas* on Tara, in which it is said of the earthwork enclosure, *Ráth Laoghair*, that "Therein are four doors facing the cardinal points..." (*Cethri doirrsí cach ardae indtí*) (ed and trans Stokes 1894: 280-1,284). This phenomenon also appears to be evident in the siting of high crosses around ecclesiastical settlements. In Armagh, for example, at least one cross (the *crois do-suir Ratha*) and the gateway with which it was associated (the *dhorus Ratha*), and possibly also the surviving cross stump and base - if it was originally located to the west of the west door of the cathedral (pp 252-2,268,308-9,318-9), were orientated on cardinal points. This association between the location of high crosses and cardinal orientation is supported by other sources. Thus, the *Vita tripartita* mentions "... the cross on the road to the chapel (*"nemid"*) southwards" (trans Stokes 1887,1:241) and the "*croiss in-dorus tigi Patraic*" (ibid,1:237), which suggests a cross located to the west of the *daimliag*. The same source also mentions a *chros deiscertach* ("southern cross") (ibid,1:239), which is suggestive of the cardinal orientation of this cross (but see p 340 concerning the location of this cross).

However, it is not only high crosses within the city which exhibit orientation, but the very city itself. Thus, the boundaries, now



preserved as streets, which radiate from the central enclosure to the presumed gateways are orientated on the cardinal points. As these form the major internal divisions within the city, the spatial units within Armagh are also orientated, with north-eastern, south-eastern, south-western and north-western quarters (pp 276-87). Within these spatial units, the churches, not surprisingly, are also orientated, either east-west or, in one probable case, north-south (p 262). In fact, every major physical feature, structure or spatial unit within early historic Armagh appears to have been orientated. Like St John the Divine's Heavenly Jerusalem of the Apocalypse, Armagh was an ideal city.

#### *Imago Mundi: Armagh as Cosmological Reproduction*

In the discussion of external boundaries, their significance was discussed in terms of their creating a cognitive and qualitative distinction between the area which lies within the boundary and the space which lies beyond it (pp 289-90). However, because early historic Armagh may have comprised three concentric enclosures (pp 249-71), the situation is somewhat more complex. The presence of these concentric boundaries within the city suggests that a distinction existed between different zones of the ecclesiastical settlement. Chronological and functional distinctions between these zones have been suggested (pp 263-4, 270-1), but it must be considered that the principal distinctions between them were related to status and sanctity.

One of the symbolic functions of boundaries associated with religious sites appears to be to demarcate the sacred from the profane, or at least the less sacred. A corollary of this, therefore, is that the area furthest from the outermost boundary, and the profane world, is

perceived as being of the greatest sanctity. This is demonstrated by chapter five, *De numero terminorum sancti loci*, in book four, *De locis consecratis*, of the *Collectio canonum Hibernensis* (ed Wasserschleben 1885:175; trans Sheehy, in Doherty 1985:59):

There ought to be two or three *termini* around a holy place: the first in which we allow no one at all to enter except priests, because laymen do not come near it, nor women unless they are clerics; the second, into its streets the crowds of common people, not much given to wickedness, we allow to enter; the third, in which men who have been guilty of homicide, adulterers and prostitutes, with permission and according to custom, we do not prevent from going within. Whence they are called, the first *sanctissimus*, the second *sanctior*, the third *sanctus*, bearing honour according to their differences.

This illustrates the perceived distinctions which existed between the enclosures of an ecclesiastical settlement. Of particular interest is the fact that these are perceived in terms of relative sanctity and that the degree of sanctity of an enclosure determines who may or may not have access to it. This epitomizes the practice of the restriction of access within religious sites.

The morphology of early historic Armagh reflects a similar manifestation of the perception and use of sacred space. What appears to have been the central enclosure of the ecclesiastical settlement, the area which is now occupied by the cathedral graveyard, may have formed the focus of the ecclesiastical settlement, for it occupies the summit of the hill and lies at the centre of the city (pp 265-7). It is the source (or the destination) of the postulated circumambulatory way, and from it radiate the internal boundaries which delimit the quarters within the area of the outer enclosure. Therefore, just as access from any one spatial unit within the city to another was potentially impaired or controlled by the radial and concentric boundaries, and the gateways in the latter, access to and from the centre was facilitated by the radial



routes and possible circumambulatory way which emerged from it. The entire city is focussed upon, and organized around, the sacred centre

(cf Lynch 1973:306):

Sometimes the environment is organized, not by a general directional system, but by one or more intensive foci, toward which other things seem to 'point'.... This sacred focus polarizes and organizes the entire surrounding area.

Somewhat anomalously, however, the principal, central spatial unit which is mentioned in the annals is the *Raith*, the boundary of which is identified above with the middle, rather than the inner, line of enclosure which appears to be fossilized within the post-Medieval street-plan of the city (pp 249-65). This may reflect the later date of these sources, by which period, within the expanded city, the original extent of the ecclesiastical settlement was perceived as the sacred centre (pp 270-1). Comprising the central and middle enclosures, this spatial unit was presumably called the *Raith* because, comprising the totality of the earlier foundation, it was enclosed by a *vallum monasterii*. This appears to have comprised the core of the Medieval city. This may be the boundary which the *Vita tripartita* records as having been marked by St Patrick, and within which he allegedly founded the first church on Cathedral Hill (pp 294-5). The *Daimliac Mór*, the principal church of Armagh, which was believed to occupy the site of St Patrick's first church and was dedicated to him, appears to have constituted the spiritual and cognitive centre of the city. Around this church lay a cemetery and it seems possible that this area comprised a largely open precinct, or at least one which was occupied by a graveyard (Reeves 1860:18; pp 259-60, above). This may have had the effect of emphasizing the separateness and exclusivity - and therefore the supreme sanctity - of the church. Within the innermost enclosure, and probably

to the north-west of the *Daimliac* stood the *cloictech* (ibid:14-5; Barrow 1979:54; Swan 1985:14-5). This is first attested sa 989 (AClon): "... Ardmach was also burnt, both Church houses and steeple..." (ed Murphy 1896:163). The location of the round tower within the central enclosure of Irish ecclesiastical foundations appears to follow a formalized pattern (Swan 1985:99):

The church or cathedral without exception aligned east-west, with the principal doorway generally facing west. The round tower is located to the south-west, west or north-west of the church and in almost all cases can be shown to be on, or close to, the perimeter of the inner enclosure. Likewise the entrance to the tower consistently faces towards the church entrance, reinforcing the concept of their having been planned in association with each other.

The symbolism of this, and the central foci of ecclesiastical sites in general, may now be considered.

The centre is a potent symbol in many religions (Lethaby 1892:71-93; Roscher 1913; Eliade 1954b; 1957; 1959:36-47), among which it shares the same basic characteristics. The centre of the world, for example, is considered to be the sacred place *par excellence*, at which prayers or offerings to, or invocations of, a deity or deities are of the greatest efficacy (Wheatley 1971:428). At the centre is located the *axis mundi*, both the meeting point and locus/means of transgression between different planes of existence. In Christianity these planes may be conceived as Heaven, Earth and Hell. As a spiritual route between these planes, and the nearest point to the metaphysical being or beings which are perceived to reside within the elevated plane, the *axis mundi* is often conceived in terms of a projection of, or from, the earth and is often symbolized by a mountain, tree, pillar or tower.

The concept of the centre is known to have existed amongst the Celtic-speaking peoples of north-western Europe (Loth 1915) and is well



represented in early Irish literature (Rees and Rees 1961:146-72). Indeed, it has already been introduced in the discussion of the royal centres of early historic Ireland (pp 104-10). The phenomenon of the sacred centre is also evident in Judaeo-Christian tradition (Ezekial 5:5): "Thus saith the Lord God; This is Jerusalem: I have set it in the midst of the nations and countries that are round about her". This, and the religious context of such a concept, is most clearly embodied in Medieval maps such as the Hereford Cathedral *Mappa Mundi*, which was formerly the centre piece of a tryptych and which locates Jerusalem at the centre of the world.

Sacred trees were common in early historic Ireland and were often associated with ecclesiastical sites (Lucas 1963:27-34) - including Armagh, where the destruction of a *fidnemedh* ("sacred wood/grove") by fire was considered to be worth recording (AFM sa 995; AU sa 995). (Cf the *nemid* in *Vita tripartita*, quoted on p 326, above, which may be used in its other sense of "chapel" or "oratory" [Joynt 1950: cols 21-21]). Sacred trees are another widespread religious phenomenon and their veneration is probably related to the concept of the *axis mundi*. Round towers (Barrow 1979; Rynne 1980), which, by the eleventh century had become an integral part of ecclesiastical foundations, are particularly interesting in this respect and may possess a significance which transcends their ostensible, but not entirely convincing, functions as bell towers and refuges. Up to 35 m in height and located in close proximity to the principal church, at the centre of the ecclesiastical settlement, round towers may be interpreted as elaborate architectural expressions of the concept of the *axis mundi*, reaching towards Heaven in an eternal quest for salvation (cf Moholy-Nagy 1968: 66). In the case of

Armagh, the central enclosure, within which stood the *cloitech* and the principal church, would have constituted the most sacred part of the city. In addition to this, the three enclosures of the ecclesiastical settlement may embody an oblique reference to the three planes of the cosmos, Heaven, Earth and Hell. The implication, certainly, is one of increasing sanctity towards the centre.

The status of Armagh as the centre reintroduces the significance of orientation. The *axis mundi* is perceived to be the scene of the generation of great cosmic and spiritual power, which diffuses throughout the religious complex, emanating from the gates of the enclosure and flowing towards the cardinal points (Wheatley 1971:435). This is achieved by the orientation of the religious foundation and its buildings within the cosmos. Within an Irish context, therefore, it may be appreciated that not only were high crosses symbols of Divine power (Richardson 1984:128), but also of cosmic power. It is in this that the symbolic significance of the form of high crosses - a cross within a circle - may be appreciated. Indeed, the urban and cosmic associations of this symbol are universal (Isaac 1962:12; Moholy-Nagy 1968:84-5; Rykwert 1976:45-9, 192-3).

Cardinal orientation is used to secure the centre within the cosmos. By providing points of reference, the city is located within profane space, conferring its reality, harmonizing it within its mundane setting and harnessing the metaphysical power at the point where it enters the world (Eliade 1954a:5; Wheatley 1971:414, 431-6, 451; Rykwert 1976:90; see also Hertz 1909, trans Needham 1973:13, 15, quoted on pp 366-7, below).



Orientation creates a sense of order within religious complexes (Lethaby 1892:53-70; Rosenau 1959:31; Curl 1970:76; Wheatley 1971:311, 450-1,478-9). However, by formalizing spatial divisions, orientation promotes cognitive and perceptual distinctions between different areas. This is apparent in the case of the spatial components of early historic Armagh, both centripetal (the enclosures) and radial (the "thirds" or quarters). During the early historic period, Armagh appears to have displayed a highly structured and formalized plan. Having discussed the spatial organization and cardinal orientation of Armagh, it can be seen that the discrete areas which this produces are invested with specific and opposing meaning.

The major spatial division within early historic Armagh is produced by a boundary which runs east-west through the city. That this boundary is genuine is suggested by its coincidence with much of the length of the proposed circumambulatory way. This boundary appears to be delineated by that portion of the circumambulatory way which coincides with the southern boundary of the *Raith* and the boundary which leads eastwards from the *Raith*. Its course is preserved by the western and southern lengths of Callan Street, Castle Street, and Market Street. Indeed, part of this line still marks a boundary, that between the district electoral wards of Lurgyvallen and Downs. As a cognitive boundary, it is strengthened by the location on it of the *dhorus Ratha* on the east, the *crois do-suir ratha* which stood outside it, and Market Street - the prominent street which leads east from the cathedral. Rocque's map also shows a well, possibly a holy well, and which presumably may be identified as the Stone Cross Well, as being located in Market Street, on the same boundary (pp 252-3).

This east-west boundary divides Armagh into northern and southern halves. The existence of these is evident not only within the city's morphology, but also appears to be attested in literary sources. Thus, the *Liber angeli* (S16; ed and trans Bieler 1979:186; p 356, below) mentions an "*aeclessia aquilonalis plagae*" ("church of the northern district"), while the *Annals of Ulster* (sa 915; ed MacAirt and MacNiocaill 1983:364) refers to the burning of "*leith deiscertach*" ("the southern half") of Armagh.

According to Hertz (1909; trans Needham 1973:8), "The whole universe is divided into two spheres: things, beings, and powers attract or repel each other; implicate or exclude each other, according to whether they gravitate towards the one or the other of the two poles". The division of those two halves along an east-west line, distinguishing between northern and southern moieties, is a common feature within religious sites. The conceptual significance of this division, around which complex systems of dual symbolic classification are often based (ibid:20), may lie in the east-west course of the sun, which divides daily the cosmos into two halves (Lethaby 1892:41).

In the case of Armagh, however, the nature of this two-fold division is complicated by two factors, the presence of the inner enclosure and the existence of spatial subdivisions. The central enclosures - that is, the *Raith* and that which appears to be represented by the cathedral graveyard - would appear to be of dual, or even ambiguous, status within the city's topography. Firstly, the *Raith*'s spatial integrity, the status of the central enclosures as the supremely sacred precinct and their possible identification as the earlier extent of the ecclesiastical settlement, indicates that the *Raith* belongs to



neither the northern nor the southern spatial divisions. Rather, it transcends all spatial and cognitive distinctions within the city. As a discrete spatial and cognitive unit, the central enclosures exist independently and pre-eminently, in their own right, at the median point of the boundary between the northern and southern moieties. However, the spatial integrity of the central enclosures is maintained by virtue of the fact that the east - west boundary which delineates the two moieties is comprised in part by that section of the postulated circumambulatory way which circumscribes the southern arc of the boundary of the *Raith* (fig 21). This has the effect of incorporating the *Raith* within the northern half of the ecclesiastical settlement. Whilst one must beware of adopting circular arguments, it is possible that the apparent role of the postulated circumambulatory way - together with Market Street - as the boundary marker between the northern and southern halves of Armagh may add to the veracity of the identification of this circuitous route and its possible function.

The second factor which makes Armagh's topography more complex is that, although the northern and southern moieties may represent the major spatial and cognitive units within the city, there are further subdivisions. These are formed by the "thirds", of which there originally seem to have been four (pp 283-7). Thus, *Trián Saxan* and the northern half of *Trián Mór* lie within the northern moiety, while *Trián Masain* and the southern half of *Trián Mór* belong to the southern moiety.

One of the properties of the centre, which is manifested in the religious sites of many societies, is that it comprises a microcosm (Lethaby 1892:32-52; Eliade 1959:42-3,45,52-3; Wheatley 1971:431-2,450). This is achieved by the form of the religious complex constituting an

*imago mundi*, a symbolic representation of the world. This phenomenon is attested in early historic Ireland as a literary motif, principally in Middle Irish texts which describe the symbolic but mythological spatial organization of the royal halls and the seating arrangements of the *rí cóicida* (Rees and Rees 1961:118-22;147-52; pp 105-6, above) and of the *rí Laigin* and his subject kings (p 138). Also, in the conceptual scheme which attributes specific properties and "functions" to each *cóiced* (Rees and Rees 1961:122-39), those properties are reproduced in *Mide*, the central *cóiced* and *imago mundi* of Ireland (ibid:127). No examples of the expression of this concept as a physical reality have been identified previously in Ireland. However, the morphology of early historic Armagh may be seen to constitute an *imago mundi*.

The cosmological symbolism of early historic Ireland, consisting of four quarters having at their union a fifth and central spatial unit, is discussed above (pp 103-14). This form of spatial organization is reproduced within Armagh in the form of four peripheral districts - the "thirds" - radial subdivisions surrounding the spiritual centre of the city, the *Raith*. That this four-fold spatial division around a centre was perceived as applying not only to Armagh, or even Ireland, but to the world as a whole, is revealed by passages in the *Vita tripartita* (trans Stokes 1887,1:239): "An angel came to Patrick in Armagh. 'Today', saith he, 'the relics of the apostles are divided in Rome throughout the four quarters (*focetharaird*) [of the globe]...". In its implication that Rome is the centre of the four quarters, this source appears to be another example of the linking of the status of Armagh with that of Rome (pp 211-2,346-7). Armagh, as an *imago mundi* of a cosmos divided into four quarters, also constituted the centre. This cosmology is echoed in



the *Lebor brecc* (ibid, 2:431), "... great darkness and dimness lay over the hearts of the heathen until the Sun of righteousness, Jesus Christ, scattered his splendours throughout the four quarters (*cethaird*) of the world (*indomain*) to enlighten it".

The radial spatial units may be associated with specific *cóiceda* on the basis of the correspondence between their relative positions and those of the *cóiceda* within their five-fold cosmological scheme of Ireland. Additionally, in the case of two "thirds" there appears to be corroboratory evidence which enables them to be associated with specific *cóiceda* with greater confidence. *Trián Masain*, for instance, comprises the south-eastern quarter of the ecclesiastical settlement and within it were located the church and crosses dedicated to St Brigit (pp 278-9). Thus, *Trián Masain* seems to correspond with *Laigin*, the south-eastern *coiced* of Ireland, within which - at Kildare - was located the cult centre of St Brigit.

Given the possible cosmological dimension of the radial subdivisions, the name *Trián Conchobair* (pp 283-7) assumes a new significance because of its apparent association with, or reference to, Conchobar mac Nessa, the mythological *ri Ulad* who features in the epic tales of the Ulster Cycle (p 155). In reference to this, the historical over-kingdom of *Ulaíd* (as distinct from the cosmological unit of the *coiced*) is sometimes referred to as the *cóicidh Conchobuir* ("fifth of Conchobar") during the early historic period (eg AU sa 839, 850, 918. The entry from AU sa 850 is quoted on p 361, below). The name *Trián Conchobair*, therefore, may constitute a reference to *Ulaíd* and indicate that, within the symbolic organization of early historic Armagh, *Trián Conchobair* symbolized the *cóiced* of *Ulaíd*. This would correspond with

the suggestion that *Trián Conchobair* may represent the original name of the district which is referred to in the annals as *Trián Saxan* (pp 277-8). Certainly, the location of *Trián Saxan*, the north-eastern quarter of the city, corresponds with the relative position of *Ulaíd* within Ireland.

A case is made above (pp 103-27) that the five-fold cosmological organization of Ireland is an ideological construct of the early historic period. In essence, however, it is a timeless concept, a construct of a past political reality which both dominated and dominates the perception of early historic Ireland. Its reproduction is consistent within the context of early historic Armagh, but emphasizes further the extent to which the morphology of Armagh is firmly rooted in the past. However, it is noticeable that by the eleventh century, the cosmological, and presumably ideological, significance of Armagh's morphology appears to have declined or even been eclipsed, because by then the annals attest only three peripheral spatial units - "thirds" - as opposed to the four which appear originally to have existed and are evident within the city's morphology (pp 276-87). Not only that, but the eclipsed "third" is the one with, in cosmological terms, what appears to be the most significant name, *Trián Conchobair*. If this constitutes evidence for the diminished significance of the cosmological symbolism of Armagh's spatial organization by the close of the early historic period - as it would seem to do - then it may suggest a date early in that period for the development of Armagh's morphology and the significance of the cosmological scheme which it expresses.

The existence within Armagh of northern and southern moieties (pp 333-5) also constitutes an *imago mundi*, although the cosmological scheme



which these reproduce can be isolated more closely in time. By the eighth century there existed in Ireland a cognitive scheme which distinguishes between two halves of the island, northern and southern. This appears to have been conceived primarily as a spatial and a racial distinction, but also reflected a political one, although in all these aspects it was essentially highly idealized. The boundary of the two halves was perceived to be marked by *Eíscir Riada*, the natural, discontinuous glacial ridge which formed an ancient routeway between Galway Bay and Dublin.

This division, and the names of the two halves, were attributed to two mutually hostile mythological characters. *Leth Cuinn* was believed to derive its name from Conn, the eponymous ancestor of the *Dál Cuinn*, those peoples who were considered to be of indigenous *Eraínn* stock and who occupied the north of Ireland. Similarly, *Leth Moga* was held to derive its name from Mug Nuadat, alias *Eógan*, the eponymous ancestor of the allegedly more recent *Eóganachta* peoples of *Mumu* (O'Rahilly 1946: 191-2; Rees and Rees 1961:100-1; Byrne 1973:67). Of course, these distinctions are mythological, arising from the concern of early Irish historians with determining genealogical and racial origins. Nevertheless, the frequency with which this distinction is promoted in the literature suggests that it was deeply ingrained within the Irish consciousness. According to this scheme, therefore, *Leth Moga* comprised the *cóiceda* of *Mumu* and *Laigin*, while *Leth Cuinn* comprised the *cóiceda* of *Connachta*, *Mide* and *Ulaib*. *Leth Cuinn* was therefore dominated by the northern and southern branches of the *Uí Néill* during the early historic period, suggesting the two-fold division of Ireland to be a *Uí Néill* construct.

Within early historic Armagh, this distinction between north and south is reproduced in the form of two discrete spatial units (pp 333-5). In addition to this, however, there appears to be an opposition between religious foci within the halves of the ecclesiastical settlement. A possible example of this is in the *Vita tripartita* (ed and trans Stokes 1887,1:238-9), which contrasts a southern cross with a northern cross: "At the southern cross in Óenach Macha (*INchros deiscertach indÓenach Macha*) four chariots were brought to Patrick. By the northern cross (*chros tuascertach*), however, God appeared to him in the shape which He will have on the Day of Judgement...". Although the reference here is to Óenach Macha (on which see pp 137-44), it is possible that this is a scribal error for *Ard Macha* (an element of confusion or ambiguity between *Aenach Macha* and *Ard Macha* may also be evident in *AUSA* 1021, quoted on p 141). Certainly, crosses are attested in Armagh (pp 305-16), whereas their presence on an assembly site, including that of the Óenach Macha, is unattested.

Less equivocally, both *Muirchu* (1:24,16; ed Bieler 1979:110) and the *Vita tripartita* (ed Stokes 1887,1:292) mention a *sinstralis aeclessiae* ("northern church"), while the latter source (ibid,2:354) and the *Liber angeli* (§15-6; ed Bieler 1979:186) mention an *australi basilica* ("southern church"). Of particular importance, the *Liber angeli* (trans Bieler 1979:186; quoted on p 355, below), contrasts an *aeclessia aquilonalis plagae* with the *australi... basilica*. The names and locations of these two churches appear to constitute a further manifestation of the north-south opposition within Armagh. The mid-seventh century date of composition of the core of the *Liber angeli* (p 346) suggests that this opposition was perceived to exist in Armagh from



at least that date. The conceptual significance of the cardinal associations of some of Armagh's churches is suggested by the fact that one is still referred to as "*tempull deiscertach*" ("the southern church") sa 1196 (AU).

In order to assess the significance of this opposition it is necessary to consider the spatial relationships of those churches within Armagh which are dedicated to Irish saints. Only three churches are known to fall into this category. The city's principal church, the *Daimliac*, is first recorded in the annals sa 788 (AU). It occupied the site where St Patrick is believed to have founded a church on Cathedral Hill, and was dedicated to the saint (Tirechan 22.(1); ed Bieler 1979: 140): "... *in aeclessia Patricii in Ardd Machae...*".

The Church of St Colum Cille, which is first recorded sa 1010 (AU), is dismissed by Reeves (1860:27) as having been of little importance. However, Colum Cille was one of the most highly venerated of early Irish saints and the founder of the important monastery of Iona. As a member of a northern *Uí Néill* dynasty, *Cenél Conaill*, his cult was observed widely within the northern and southern *Uí Néill* over-kingdoms in the north and midlands, with its cult centres at Derry and Iona confirming its northern basis. This, combined with the paucity of earlier annalistic references to churches within Armagh generally, suggests that the Church of St Colum Cille may have been both more important and earlier than initially appears. Reeves (1860:27) locates this church, somewhat anomalously, just outside the boundary of the outer enclosure, although a case for its inclusion within this boundary is made above (pp 277-8). If this was the case, then the Church of St Colum Cille would have lain within *Trián Saxan*, the north-eastern "third".

The other church which is of relevance to this discussion is that dedicated to St Brigit. The cult of St Brigit, with its centre at Kildare, was the most dominant in *Laigin*, but was important in the north too. It was prominent in Armagh and secondary in terms of importance only to the cult of St Patrick (Paterson 1945:43). The church dedicated to St Brigit is first recorded sa 1085 (AU) and it, along with the high crosses dedicated to the same saint, was located in the southern half of the city. The southern location of this church suggests that it may be equated with the *australi basilica*, which is attested in the mid-seventh century *Liber angeli* (p 260).

This evidence suggests that the location of churches and church dedications within Armagh displays a high degree of spatial patterning. Just as the form of the city reproduces the major spatial and conceptual divisions of early historic Ireland, the distribution of ecclesiastical foundations appears to mirror that of the cults of the saints to which they are dedicated. Thus, the church dedicated to St Colum Cille, whose cult was centred in the north, is located in the north of the ecclesiastical settlement. In a similar manner, the cult of St Brigit was pre-eminent throughout *Laigin*, the south-eastern *coiced*, while the church dedicated to her stood within the south-eastern quarter of Armagh. The cult of St Patrick appears to have originated in south-eastern *Ulaid* and to have been prominent in the midlands, and, correspondingly, the church dedicated to him is located in the middle - at the centre - of the city. A similar patterning may be exhibited by the high crosses. Thus, the *crois Choluim Cille* and the *crossa[ibh] Brighti* appear to have been located within the same "thirds" as the churches which bore these dedications (pp 309-10).



Armagh, therefore, was not only a microcosm of perceived ethnic and past "political" divisions, but also reproduced, in the spatial organization of churches within the city, the relative locations of the centres of the major Christian cults of early historic Ireland. This phenomenon is also recognized to be one of the properties of the centre and is embodied in many religious sites and cities throughout the world. In these, a pantheon of regional cults is brought together, and the sites of their worship ordered in space according to their distribution within the cosmos (Eliade 1954b:40; Wheatley 1971:432). In a Christian context, this pantheon may take the form of the collocation of saints' cults which were essentially of regional distribution and appeal. This brings the cults together in a spatial relationship, within a restricted area, which reflects their relative geographical distribution within Ireland as a whole. The ideological nature of this scheme and the political aspirations which it embodies may now be examined.

### The Ideological Dimension

The concept of the centre, and its properties, is manifested in so many societies that it, and other conceptions of social space, are often considered to be products of deeply seated psychological concerns (Moholy-Nagy 1968:69; Wheatley 1971:478-9). As a result, the symbolism of Jungian psychology is sometimes referred to in this context (eg Eliade 1954b:40; Curl 1970:6). That the physical manifestation of the concept of the centre reveals certain innate psychological concerns may be true in part, but to attribute it exclusively to this denies the individual a role as a knowledgeable actor within a social continuum. People do not build and organize the world around them in such a complex

and ordered manner as a consequence of subconscious and automatic impulses (cf Durkheim and Mauss 1902; Danielli 1951; Kus 1982).

As Leach (1976:51,54) sees it:

Whenever human beings construct a dwelling or lay out a settlement they do so in a geometrically ordered way. This seems to be as 'natural' to Man as his capacity for language. We need order in our surroundings.

....

If we ask: 'But why should people behave like this?' the answer may be that all human beings have a deep psychological need for the sense of security which comes from knowing where you are. But 'knowing where you are' is a matter of recognising social as well as territorial position.

And, according to Nuttgens (1972:28),

There comes a point... in the development of civilizations when people are no longer struggling to come to terms with their surroundings but are able either to go into partnership with nature or to buy it up and to create an environment that expresses an *idea*. It may express a multiplicity of ideas; it inevitably expresses a lot of aspirations. But it can be said to express an *idea* if it has a unity and coherence: which means that some central theme or intention has dominated the scene, or can be understood as dominating the scene by later generations.

We are here in the company of great architecture and planning. All architecture reveals the scale and power and integrity of its author's intentions.... the intentions of [religious architecture and planning] include solving an aesthetic problem and satisfying a definite formal aspiration.

In short, the spatial organization of buildings and settlements may represent a means of classification through which not only can the social world be more readily understood, but within which certain interests and aspirations may be promoted. This appears to be the case with early historic Armagh.

The landscape is ordered by dominant socio-political groups (eg Duncan 1976). Its structuring is primarily a cognitive process rather than a physical one, and is achieved principally by the dissemination of information concerning the landscape. This is typified by the *dindshenchas* ("lore of places") (pp 24-6,76,143) and by the prominence which monuments, such as Navan Fort, and the landscape in general, are



accorded in the epic literature (pp 73-5, 155-6). The form of cities, to a greater extent than probably any other settlement type, is susceptible to political influence (Moholy-Nagy 1968:69; Curl 1970). As Kus (1982:

54) states:

... one most promising area of investigation is the spatial organization of complex and urban centres. The high degree of urban planning characteristic of certain early states is highly significant to an argument of the mapping of a social order onto space.... urban space is potentially social space par excellence.

As the expression of a dominant socio-political group, urban form may embody and express the values, hopes and aspirations of that group. In order to appreciate this, urban form may be studied as ideology, as a constructed body of knowledge drawn from the past which seeks to perpetuate asymmetrical relations of power and further the ambitions of a socio-political elite. The high degree of spatial organization which is evident within the morphology of early historic Armagh almost precludes the role of organic growth in the origin and development of at least the more fundamental elements of its spatial units and boundaries. The aspiration which is of concern here is Armagh's claim of ecclesiastical primacy within Ireland.

The earliest evidence of Armagh's claim of primacy is in the *Liber angeli* (§12; trans Bieler 1979:185), in which an angel is said to have told Patrick that "... a vast *termonn* is being established by the Lord for the city of Armagh... the Lord God has given all the tribes of the Irish as a *paruchia* to you and to this city, which in Irish is named Ardd Machae". The same source (§21; trans Bieler 1979:189) goes on to state that:

Every free church and city of episcopal rank which is seen to have been founded in the whole island of the Irish, and any place anywhere that is called *domnach* (is), according to the word of the angel, in special union with bishop Patrick and the heir of his see

of Armagh, because as we have said above, God has given him the entire island.

In this claim may be detected the motivation behind Tírechán's work on the churches (allegedly) founded by St Patrick, and its emphasis on churches with *domnach* names, as well as the proliferation of (allegedly) early annalistic entries which purport to record the association of early ecclesiastical foundations with bishops.

The dating of the *Liber angeli* is the subject of some debate (summarized in Sharpe 1984a:60-4), part of which hinges on the distinction and chronological implications of the text as it exists in its present form and the sources upon which it draws (Binchy 1962a:64; Hughes 1966:275-81). However, it is undisputed that Tírechán, writing around 670, had access to the same sources, while Sharpe (1984:62) goes a step further and makes a convincing case that Tírechán "... knew the *Liber angeli* and saw his purpose as supplementary to it...". On this basis the *Liber angeli* may be assigned a mid-seventh century date of composition. Bieler (1979:52) describes this source as "... a statement of the claims of Armagh, as to both territory and ecclesiastical supremacy, in a hagiographical setting". The basis of this claim is that, as a result of St Patrick's (alleged) conversion of the Irish, and the possession of several (allegedly) important relics, Armagh should have the status and jurisdiction of a metropolitan see. This aspiration appears to have been inspired by, and modelled on, the Roman concept of a Holy See (Sharpe 1984). This is particularly interesting, given the efforts made in the *Liber angeli* to associate Armagh with Rome (ibid:70; pp 211-2, 336, above) and Armagh's claim to hold relics of the principal Roman martyrs (*Liber angeli* S17-9; ed Bieler 1979:187),:

... this city has been established by God as supreme and free and has been specially dedicated by the angel of God and by the



apostolic man, the holy bishop Patrick. It therefore has precedence by a certain privilege and by the heavenly authority of the supreme bishop, its founder, over all churches and monasteries of all the Irish. Furthermore, it ought to be venerated in honour of the principal martyrs Peter and Paul, Stephen, Lawrence, and the others.

The fabrication of hagiographical traditions in support of Armagh's claim continues with Muirchú's *Vita Sancti Patricii*, written between 661 and 700 (Bieler 1979:1-2), a source which portrays St Patrick as having been particularly active in the midlands.

The emphasis of Armagh's claim of primacy may have altered during the second half of the seventh century from one of seeking jurisdiction over an episcopal see to one of establishing more direct control over churches which were allegedly founded by St Patrick. These foundations, therefore, were claimed to lie within Armagh's *paruchia*, the monastic federation over which the abbot had jurisdictional authority (on which see Hughes 1966:57-78). It is these links which Tírechán's *Collectanea* seeks to establish (Sharpe 1984a:72). Sharpe (1984a:72) attributes this change in emphasis to opposition from other Irish churches to Armagh's claim to primacy over a metropolitan see. This theme is linked to the nature of the organization of the early Irish Church, concerning which there is a continuing debate (Sharpe 1984b), but one which it is not sought to rehearse here.

Armagh, however, was not the only claimant of ecclesiastical primacy. The other contender was Kildare, whose claim is stated in Cogitosus' *Vita Sanctae Brigidae*. In this, Cogitosus maintains that St Brigit's *paruchia* extends from coast to coast and that the bishop of Kildare is the archbishop of Ireland. It is interesting to note that the earliest Irish hagiographical works appear during the seventh century,

originating with lives of SS Brigit, Colum Cille and Patrick, the most prominent Irish saints and whose cults are represented within early historic Armagh. This is strongly suggestive of the ideological nature of, and political motivation behind, this literature.

The seventh century saw the consolidation of ecclesiastical power under the control of a small number of monastic foundations. This power was manifested in the form of authority over extensive *paruchia*e. Although Armagh and Kildare were two of the most powerful foundations of the period, the extent of their authority was still essentially regional. This is presumably why churches in *Connacht* and *Mide* feature so prominently in *Tírechán's* writings, as Armagh attempted to extend its authority beyond its heartland in south-eastern Ulster. Both Armagh and Kildare sought to bring more churches under their control, especially in those areas peripheral to their authority, from the mid-seventh century (McCone 1982:139). Where Armagh and Kildare, together with the *paruchia* of St Colum Cille, may have differed from other foundations, however, is that they appear to have enjoyed particularly close relationships with some of the most powerful dynasties in early historic Ireland. In the case of Armagh, this was the northern *Uí Néill* dynasty of *Cenél nEógain* (pp 362-3), while Kildare was associated with the *Uí Dúnlainge* (Byrne 1973:151-2; Doherty 1985:60-3). These relationships between secular and ritual authority were mutually beneficial. Indeed, the national aspirations - as expressed in the concept of a high-kingship of Ireland - of these dynasties, particularly the *Uí Néill*, may be related to those of the foundations with which they were associated - the creation of, and jurisdiction over, a primatial see (Sharpe 1982:58-9; 1984b:26-8).



It is these aspirations which appear to be expressed in the morphology of early historic Armagh. This is suggested by the cognitive associations of the two halves, north and south, which can be distinguished within the city. According to Paterson (1945:43, n 5), Armagh was formerly divided into two wards, the North Ward and the South Ward, which were also known as St Patrick's and St Brigit's respectively. The antiquity of this nomenclature and the location of the boundary between the two wards are uncertain, but the division is consistent with the spatial organization of the early historic city and the cognitive distinction which appears to exist between its two halves. Thus, within the southern half of the ecclesiastical settlement were located the *reclis Brighte*, the *chroisalibh Brighte* and a "Street of St Bride" (ibid:43). In addition to this, St Bridget's Well (IGR H 87894476) is located to the south of the city, some 390 m south-east of the boundary of the outer enclosure. The association between the cult of St Brigit and the southern half of Armagh is a strong one, and, like the association of the South Ward, it appears that the southern half of the ecclesiastical settlement was perceived as "St Brigit's Half".

Conversely, the principal church of early historic Armagh was allegedly founded by, and dedicated to, St Patrick and occupied the central enclosure. The course of the proposed circumambulatory way incorporates the *Raith* within the northern half of the city (pp 299-300, 333). It seems likely, therefore, that the northern half of Armagh was perceived as "St Patrick's Half". This may be supported by the fact that the major Patrician relics, the *Bachal Ísu* (pp 294-6) and the *Clog-an-eadhachta Phatraic* ("the Bell of St Patrick's Will") (on which see Reeves 1850; 1886; Ellacombe 1872:353-9; Petrie 1878:109-12; Raftery

1941:156, pls 78-80; Henry 1970:94-7, pls 22-4; Ó Floinn 1983), and the Book of Armagh - the manuscript compilation in which the *Liber angeli* is preserved - were kept in *Tríán Saxan*, in the northern half of the city (Reeves 1860:19-20). These spatial units and their cognitive associations may be expressed schematically in *idealized* form (fig 21).

The division of Armagh into two spatially and cognitively discrete units may be dated to the early historic period. Moreover, the conceptual distinction within Ireland which the morphology of Armagh appears to reproduce, between *Leth Cuinn* and *Leth Moga*, belongs to the eighth century (Byrne 1973:67). However, the political and religious context of the oppositions expressed by the spatial divisions within Armagh, and their cognitive associations, strongly suggests that the main topographical components of the city - the radial and concentric spatial units, the possible circumambulatory way, and the major ecclesiastical foundations - were in existence by the mid-seventh century. This appears to be supported by the reference to the "*aquilonalis plagae*" ("northern district") in the *Liber angeli* (pp 333-4, 356).

The etymology of the names *Leth Cuinn* and *Leth Moga* appears to reveal the ideological significance of Armagh's spatial organization. Many placenames can be interpreted in two ways. They can be explained, sometimes superficially, as being derived from, or related to, deities, mythological kings, heroes, or eponymous ancestors. This manifests a form of rationalization of the social landscape which is akin to that found within mythological sources (pp 23-5, 74-6). Alternatively, placenames may have a more complex and significant underlying etymology. Thus, while the names *Leth Cuinn* and *Leth Moga* were understood to denote



"Conn's Half" and "Mug's Half" respectively during the early historic period, they also had a more latent, or perhaps eclipsed, significance. As nouns, *conn* means "head" or "chief", while *mug* means "slave" or "servant" (Rees and Rees 1961:101). The name *Leth Moga* may be associated with the attribution of the "function" of slave to *Mumu* (ibid:126-7) within the Middle Irish cosmological scheme which associates various properties with the *cóiceda* (pp 106-9). However, as a cognitive system, in opposition to the name *Leth Conn*, it seems possible that this nomenclature is of greater, and ideological, significance.

The effect of the opposition inherent in these names appears to be to characterize the northern half as being superior in status to the southern half. At a national level this may be related to the strategy of legitimation of the *Uí Néill*-conceived and monopolized high-kingship of Ireland, although this is not of concern here. What is of interest is the manner in which the values attached to these names could have been used within the topography of early historic Armagh to present the case that St Patrick, or his cult, was of superior status to St Brigit (or her cult). Indeed, the etymology of *Leth Cuinn* is reflected in the characterization of Armagh as *Cenn hÉirenn* ("the Head of Ireland") in the mid- or late ninth century Triads of Ireland (ed and trans Meyer 1906a: 2).

The concept of the pre-eminence of the north is widely attested in Ireland from the early historic period to the present day (Rees and Rees 1961:382). For instance, the north side of a house is traditionally regarded as the side of honour (Byrne 1973:194). Other manifestations of this may be detected. Within Armagh was located the *cimiterio regum*/*mausoleum regum* ("cemetery/tomb of the kings") in which the kings of

*Cené*l *nEógain* were buried during the tenth and eleventh centuries (AFM sa 933; 1149; 1155; 1188; AU sa 1064; 1166). Although the precise location of the cemetery is unknown, it was presumably - reflecting the status and authority of these kings - located in close proximity to the *Daimliac Nó*r, the principal church. In keeping with this, Brian Bóruma, high-king of Ireland (ob 1014), is believed to have been buried to the north of the choir (Lett 1911:297), while the (modern) inscription which (allegedly) marks his burial place is mounted on the exterior of the west wall of the north transept of the cathedral (Cathedral nd:16). (Note, however, that Reeves [1860:18] states that "The *Relicc*, or 'Cemetery', probably occupied at first the space next the great church on the south. In after time, it extended all round. A portion was appropriated to regal interments ...". Reeves, therefore, does not appear to advocate a specific location for the royal cemetery).

The pre-eminence of the north, as well as the several examples of north-south orientated churches which are known to have existed in early historic Ireland (Hamlin 1984:119), including the *Saball* in Armagh (Reeves 1860:15; p 262, above), may reflect a Biblical precedent. From the detailed description given in Exodus (25-27), it is apparent that the Tabernacle was modelled on a north-south orientated temple, the centre of which was divided into two parts (Leach 1976:84-8). The Holy of Holies, which contained the Ark of the Covenant and the Mercy Seat, comprised the northern part (Exodus 26:33-5), thus demonstrating the pre-eminent sacredness of the north (cf Ezekial 8:3-4). A further manifestation of the pre-eminence of the north occurs in the *Vita tripartita* (ed and trans Stokes 1887, 1:238-9), which recounts how God



appeared to St Patrick, "By the northern cross ..." in *Denach Macha*, though *Ard Macha* may have been intended (p 340).

In addition to this, the superior status of the cult of St Patrick is reinforced by the city's topography. The church allegedly founded by, and dedicated to, St Patrick occupied the summit of Cathedral Hill, while St Brigit's Church stood downhill from it, on the south-eastern shoulder. As Kus (1982:58) observes, "Height is perhaps the most obvious spatial dimension to invest with social value...". In addition to this, St Patrick's Church was located at the centre of the city, but also - because Armagh constitutes an *imago mundi* (pp 332-44) - at the centre of Ireland and the Irish political and conceptual cosmos. Through this location in sacred space, the status of the cult of St Patrick was projected as transcending its original, regional significance. St Brigit's Church, in contrast, occupied a peripheral position within the ecclesiastical settlement, being located within the outer enclosure.

Other more arcane oppositions may be detected within early historic Armagh. Irish is a language in which relative position is expressed in terms of the cardinal points rather than "right" and "left". This necessitates a focus - a fixed, universal, central place or object around which the world is orientated and structured, rather than the "self" (Danielli 1951:190; Lynch 1973:305). As Hertz (1909: trans Needham 1973:10) characterizes this phenomenon, "... man is at the center of creation". This may in part be responsible for the significance of the concept of the centre in early historic Ireland. In Irish, *deiscert* and *tuaiscert* mean "south" and "north" respectively, and are also equated with "right" and "left" (Stokes 1907:11). This duality of meaning is reflected in, for example, *Cath Muigi Rath*, in which the

*rí Ulad* (ie king of the northern *coiced*) sat on the left hand side of the *rí Érenn* (p 106). Left - and in Irish that is also north - is associated in many cultures with that which is "sinister", "evil" or "dirty" (Hertz 1909; trans Needham 1973:11-4). However, having the connotation of being "abnormal", left/north is, by implication, also "sacred" (Leach 1976:54). This is in opposition to right/south, which, with the connotations of being "correct" and "normal", is symbolically "secular" (ibid:54). This also appears to emphasize the pre-eminence of the north, of "St Patrick's Half" of Armagh, and the cult of St Patrick in general.

As well as left - right, north - south symbolism, Armagh may also embody a complex colour symbolism. The evidence for this comes not from a source which is associated specifically with Armagh, but from the *Saltair na rann* (on which see p 319). The first canto of this concerns the creation of the world, including the four principal winds (*primaetha*), the eight minor winds (*fogaetha*), and their colours (ed Stokes 1883:1-2). As one might expect, the four main winds are associated with the cardinal points (cf Revelation 7:1). The north wind is black (*dub*) and the south, white (*gel*). This contrast of colours implies the existence of a perceived opposition between north and south, which accords well with the evidence relating to Armagh (pp 333-5, 338-41).

This colour symbolism may be associated with the cognitive distinctions which existed between the two moieties of Armagh. The tract on eucharistic colours in the *Lebor brecc* states that white is symbolic of chastity and sinlessness (Stokes 1887,1:clxxxix). White is associated with St Brigit because it is allegedly the colour of her habit (Post



1964:30), but also, one presumes, as a result of her spiritual and physical purity. The *Lebor brecc* associates black with the devil (Stokes 1887,1:cxc) but once again, one should be aware of the range, or even ambiguity, of meaning which may exist within systems of dual symbolic classification. As Leach (1976:54) notes in his description of right-left opposition, "Discriminations of this sort are certainly very common but oversimplified generalisations on the subject need to be treated with caution". For instance, like left/north, black may be regarded as "abnormal" and, by implication, "sacred".

In many ways, however, the meanings invested within this series of oppositions represent an inversion of those which are found not only within a Christian context, but also within Ireland. Thus, within Judaeo-Christian tradition the cosmos was perceived as being axially divided, having a dark northern half associated with death and evil, and a radiant southern half associated with righteousness, sanctity and God (cf Genesis 1:4-5). Similarly, in Ireland *tuath* means "evil" as well as "north", while *dess*, "south", also means "just" or "well arranged". In fact, *thuas*, "in the south", is derived from *uas*, "high", with the result that *ceann*, used in the sense of "top" or "head", actually applies to the south of Ireland and not to *Leth Cuinn* - the northern half - at all (Rees and Rees 1961:382). This is suggestive of the existence of an inversion of the symbolic significance of the name *Leth Cuinn* (pp 350-1).

It may be considered, therefore, that the symbolic significance of the oppositions inherent within Armagh represent an inversion of a system of dual symbolic classification which was current throughout Ireland. This inversion - one might almost say subversion - appears to

have involved the association of specific symbolic values, some of which were contrary to those in general circulation, which, when incorporated within a wider system, could be employed to Armagh's advantage. The means of achieving this set of contrasting values may have been on the basis that in Heaven (or the Otherworld) - and, by implication, anywhere of great sanctity - symbolic values represent an inversion of those found in the profane world (Rees and Rees 1961:145,381-3, n 32). This explains the apparent contradiction within the gender associations of the two moieties of Armagh. The northern half, by virtue of its association with St Patrick, is symbolically "male", while the southern half, St Brigit's, is "female". However, these associations contrast with the worshippers which the *Liber angeli* (§15-6; trans Beiler 1979:

187) associates with the two principal churches of Armagh:  
... to this aforesaid (city) also adhere three orders: virgins and penitents, and those serving the church in legitimate matrimony. And these three orders are allowed to hear the word of preaching in the church of the northern district (*in aeclessia aquilonalis plagae*) on Sundays always; in the southern basilica (*in australi uero basilica*), however, bishops and priests and anchorites and the other religious offer pleasing praises.

Thus, while within the city the apparently normal set of oppositions applied, at a metaphysical level, concerning the saints to whom the moieties were dedicated, an inversion of the earthly oppositions existed (cf Rees and Rees 1961:145,381-3). As in the churches of Armagh, it is notable that in Cogitosus' description of the Church of Kildare it is the women who occupy the north and the men, the south (trans Bieler 1963:28):

There (at Kildare) repose the glorious bodies of both Archbishop Conled and the noble virgin Brigit in their sarcophagi, the one to the right and the other to the left of a beautifully adorned altar. These sarcophagi are richly decorated with gold, silver, and multicoloured precious stones; they have also pictorial representations in relief and in colours, and are surmounted by crowns of gold and silver. The church, however, is not the original one: a new church has been erected in the place of the old one, in



order to hold the increased number of the faithful. Its ground-plan is large, and it rises to a dizzy height. It is adorned with painted tablets. The interior contains three large oratories, divided from one another by walls of timber, but all under one roof. One wall, covered with linen curtains and decorated with paintings, traverses the eastern part of the church from one side to the other. There are doors in it at either end. The one door gives access to the sanctuary and the altar, where the bishop, with his school of clerics (*regularis schola*) and those who are called to the celebration of the holy mysteries, offers the divine sacrifice to the Lord. By the other door of the dividing wall, the abbess enters with her virgins and with pious widows in order to participate in the Supper of Jesus Christ, which is His flesh and blood. The remainder of the building is divided lengthwise into two equal parts by another wall, which runs from the western side to the transverse wall. The church has many windows.

Priests and lay persons of the male sex enter by an ornamented door on the right-hand side; matrons and virgins enter by another door on the left-hand side. In this way the one basilica is sufficient for a huge crowd, separated by walls according to state, grade and sex, but united in the Spirit, to pray to the almighty Lord.

This apparent inversion of earthly oppositions again illustrates one of the characteristics of cosmological schemes. As noted in the case of the number and identification of the *coiceda* (pp 103-27), cosmologies are neither static nor rigid but - as are constructs of the past - comprise a malleable body of information. Cosmologies, therefore, display an inventiveness and possess an ability to assign and change the meanings of things. If the fluidity of cosmological schemes is not appreciated and the production of a formal and rigid "cosmology" is attempted, this can appear confusing or contradictory.

Despite this, the series of symbolic oppositions which appear to be embodied within Armagh's morphology may be expressed in simplified form for ease of understanding:

north:south

St Patrick:St Brigit

Armagh:Kildare

head/chief:slave/servant

high:low

centre:periphery

male:female

left:right

black:white

abnormal:normal

sacred:profane

superior:inferior

primacy:not primacy

The implication of this seems clear. These binary oppositions appear to allow for the signification that St Patrick, his cult and community, is of superior status to, and more sacred than, St Brigit, her cult and community. Collectively, these oppositions seem to imply that Armagh is the superior and most sacred ecclesiastical centre in Ireland. The intention of this is presumably to legitimize Armagh's claim of primacy as being eminently more appropriate and deserved than that of its main rival, Kildare, the foundation and cult centre of St Brigit.

The morphology of early historic Armagh and the binary oppositions invested within the city's topography may be identified as ideological expressions. Through the employment of concentric boundaries, the concept of the centre, and the restriction of access, spatial units within the settlement were differentiated qualitatively in terms of their degree of sacrality. The high level of spatial organization which



may be identified within the morphology of early historic Armagh appears to constitute a mapping of socio-political aspirations within space (cf Kus 1982:54). Those aspirations concern Armagh's ambition to establish and claim pre-eminence within a primatial see comprising all Ireland. By means of the city's morphology, Armagh sought to legitimize and further its claim by associating its pre-eminence, enshrined within the spatial order, with a natural or cosmological order (cf *ibid*:52). Through a system of opposing (or dual) symbolic values, the morphology of Armagh embodies a set of information which expresses the merits of its claim, while diminishing those of the other main contender for the primacy, Kildare.

Armagh's morphology therefore appears to represent as natural what is actually a cultural scheme, it represents as universal the essentially regional cult of St Patrick, and it formalizes a body of information in a manner which reduces or excludes the possibility of ambiguity or contradiction. These are all facets of a classic ideological strategy (cf Shanks and Tilley 1982:131-4; Miller and Tilley 1984:13-4). This is where the concept of cosmological reproduction can be seen to be of ideological significance, rather than a subconscious expression of some innate psychological concern.

The city's symbolic form was presumably intended to reduce, in both scale and complexity, the national issue of the claim of ecclesiastical primacy to a generalized and simplified series of binary oppositions embodied within a single locus. In this way, Armagh's case was presented simply as a contrast between the status and qualities of St Patrick and his cult and those of St Brigit and her cult. By encapsulating this in the form of a set of symbolic oppositions within the city, Armagh could

misrepresent its own case, and that of its rival, to its own advantage. Presenting these oppositions within a spatially-restricted context made it easier for Armagh to manipulate the information conveyed and maximize the impact of this ideology on its intended recipients.

From this, it may be suggested that the ideological significance of Armagh's topography and its symbolic associations was aimed at a specific audience. Only those who actually crossed the ecclesiastical boundary into the city could have been exposed to the ideological significance expressed by its form and which was, presumably, revealed in the celebration of ritual processions at certain religious festivals (on which see pp 365-9). From its literary and Biblical analogies, the cosmological scheme which relates to Armagh may be identified as elite knowledge, an ideology which secured the belief systems of a religious and secular elite. The recipients of this information probably would have fallen into one of two categories - people in positions of either ritual or secular authority. The former presumably included pilgrims to Armagh and clerics visiting on ecclesiastical business. Although the annals only record their presence at a later date, these may have included clerics such as those from *Mide* who are recorded as having been in Armagh sa 850 (AU; quoted on p 361), while the deaths of prominent clerics from other monasteries while on pilgrimage in Armagh are recorded sa 987; 1003; 1004; 1022; 1030; 1103; 1131 (AFM). These entries appear to correspond with the more detailed topographical entries relating to Armagh during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, suggesting them to be the product of specific historic circumstances (pp 216-8). As a result, the absence of earlier entries concerning the death of clerics whilst on pilgrimage in Armagh should not be regarded as significant.



The presence of individuals in positions of secular authority may be related, at least from the ninth century, to the nature of the relationship between *Cenél nEógain* and Armagh. A *ríghdál* ("royal meeting") between the over-kings of *Cenél nEógain* and *Ulaid* was held in the city sa 850 (AU; trans MacAirt and MacNiocaill 1983:311):

A royal conference (*Ríghdál*) in Ard Macha, between Mael Sechnaill, accompanied by the nobles of Leth Cuinn, and Matudan with the nobles of Conchobar's province (*coicidh Conchobuir*), and Diarmait and Fethgna with the congregation of Patrick, and Suairlech with the clerics of Mide.

In addition, a king of *Cenél nEógain* had a "domus" there by at least 870 (AU sa 869; trans MacAirt and MacNiocaill 1983:327; quoted on p 282) and the interment of *Cenél nEógain* kings and other members of the restricted royal kin group in Armagh is recorded from sa 933 (AFM; trans O'Donovan 1856,2:631), "Conchobar mac Domhnaill, *ríoghdamhna Ailigh*, died, and was interred with great honour at Armagh". However, the death there of an exiled king of *Cenél Conaill*, the other main northern *Uí Néill* dynasty, sa 760 (AFM; trans O'Donovan 1856,1:365) may suggest the residence and burial of royalty in Armagh at an earlier date: "Flaithbertach, son of Loingseach, died at Ard-Macha, after having been some time in religion".

It may also be considered that kings who were under *Cenél nEógain* hegemony were also accustomed to visiting Armagh. Indeed, it is just such kings, the *rí Uí Dorthainn* and the *tighearna Fearnmagh*, whose regicides in Armagh are recorded sa 987 and 1008 (AU) respectively (p 281). However, the period which is of concern here is the latter half of the seventh century. Unfortunately, the annals contain little information relating to Armagh during this period. Although it seems probable that Armagh was the focus of similar attention, by both

visiting kings and clerics, during this earlier period, no records of this survive.

The account in *Vita tripartita* (quoted on p 294) of St Patrick's alleged foundation of the Church of Armagh may be significant in this respect, however. It states that the *comaithib* ("magnates") of *Airthir*, the kingdom within which Armagh is located, participated in the foundation ritual. It is notable that even after the extension of *Cenél nEógain* hegemony over this kingdom, *Airthir* and some of the other kingdoms of *Airgialla* continued to vie with one another in their attempts to monopolize many of the by then hereditary ecclesiastical offices of Armagh (Ó Fiaich 1969:106; Hughes 1966:171,213; 1973:34; Byrne 1973:117-8,124-5; p 195, above. See Hughes 1966:158-72,210-23; Sharpe 1984b for a wider consideration of this theme). It is also suggested that a *scriptorium* within the *paruchia* of Armagh - perhaps even that at Armagh itself - may have been involved in the composition of the epic literature of the Ulster Cycle (pp 183-6). A possible interpretation of the political context of this epic literature is that it may constitute an oblique celebration of the eclipse of the power of the formerly mighty provincial overkingship of *Ulaid* (pp 180-1). As the territory of *Airthir* also included Navan Fort, which is portrayed as *Emain Macha* - the fortified court of the king of *Ulaid*, this may also attest the existence of a close relationship between the kings of *Airthir* and Armagh.

It is apparent that *Cenél nEógain* and the community of Armagh developed and maintained a close relationship later in the early historic period. This appears to have been mutually beneficial, assisting *Cenél nEógain* to further its aspirations of the high-kingship



of Ireland and Armagh to present its claim of ecclesiastical primacy with the support of one of the most powerful dynasties of early historic Ireland (Byrne 1973:220,255-6). Indeed, as remarked above (p 348), it is possible that both these concepts, a high-kingship of all Ireland and ecclesiastical primacy of all Ireland - both of which were alien to Ireland - emerged and developed together. This may attest the ideological structuring of secular authority. In this context, it is perhaps significant that the morphology of Armagh should reproduce a cognitive division of Ireland which appears to draw upon *Uí Néill* ideology - the dichotomy between *Leth Cuinn* and *Leth Moga* and their symbolic associations.

That the spatial and symbolic organization of Armagh appears to have been in existence by the mid-seventh century (pp 349) corresponds with the period which sees the formulation and development of Armagh's claim of primacy, as reflected in its production of Patrician hagiography (pp 345-7). In many ways, these two means of conveying ideological information - hagiographical literature and the symbolic and spatial organization of Armagh - are complementary and represent different ideological strategies. The legitimation of Armagh's claim of primacy was based on the past. This is most vividly conveyed in the hagiographical material, which sought, through the "recording" of the conversion process and the elaboration of St Patrick's role within it, to portray St Patrick as the national apostle of Ireland, and Armagh as his foundation and spiritual centre.

Whilst the spatial organization of Armagh relied primarily upon its close relationship with a perceived cosmological ordering to legitimize Armagh's claims, it also drew heavily on the past. For instance, the

reproduction of the cosmological ordering of the *cóiceda* referred to what was perceived to be the political geography not of early historic Ireland, but of an earlier era (pp 126-7). Also, the ecclesiastical boundary of one of the foundations at Armagh, possibly marking the boundary of the *Raith* - one of the principal spatial units within the city - is described in the *Vita tripartita* as having been marked out by St Patrick (p 294). In this way, the literature created the impression of a sense of historical continuity by focussing attention on those most critical parts of the settlement, the boundaries (cf Kus 1982:60; pp 314-6, above). Indeed, this continuity may be perpetuated and expressed as late as the thirteenth century, when Máel Padraig Ua Sgannail, at the time of building St Patrick's Cathedral, also excavates the ditch around Armagh (AU sa 1264; trans MacCarthy 1893:337): "The archbishop of Ard-Macha, namely, Máel-Patraic O'Sgannail, made a ditch around Ard-Macha...". Indeed, such was the apparent importance of the ecclesiastical boundaries at that time that O'Sgannail is referred to having built the *ecclesia maior* - Armagh's first cathedral - "... in the city of Armagh within the wall (... in Ardmachense [civitate] infra murum...)" (AU sa 1266; ed and trans MacCarthy 1893:340-1).

Lynn and McDowell's (1988a:58) comment that, "Given the long period of time involved, however, it is likely that the hill was enclosed in a series of earthworks, any one, or several, of which could have been the historic 'rath'" are of interest in this context. However, not only can a strong case be made for the Iron Age date of this ditch (pp 231-48), but the concept that the enclosing ditches somehow moved around through time may be disputed. As boundary markers, the location of the ditches was not arbitrary but was one of the principal means by which both the



sanctity of the ecclesiastical foundation and its links with the past and its founder were maintained. The boundaries of Armagh, both internal and external, were of the utmost importance. Not only did they give the city the form which related it to a cosmological order, but, through the activities of St Patrick and the angel Victorinus, also provided it with a venerable antiquity and a divine foundation.

It is in this context that the ideological significance of any ritual procession which may have been associated with the postulated circumambulatory way may be appreciated. Such a procession and its route may be inferred from the topography of early historic Armagh and the description of the consecration circuit at Patrick's foundation of Armagh (quoted on pp 294-5). This possible procession may have been concerned not merely with the periodic cleansing and safeguarding of the boundary of the *Raith* and the area, buildings and worshippers within it, although that may have been its origin (pp 313-15). With the possible expansion of the settlement over the area now represented by the outer enclosure (pp 269-70, 282), and the development of Armagh as a major centre of ritual authority, the procession may have been invested with additional, ideological, meaning.

Leaving the central enclosure by the proposed circumambulatory way necessitated circuiting the divine centre *desúil*. This is the form of motion which is characterized by the right-hand-turn and which, in early Christian and Irish contexts, is believed to be propitious in nature (Ferguson 1878; Simpson 1896:173-226). For instance, in the Ulster Cycle tale *Togail bruidne Dá Derga* ("The Burning of Dá Derga's Hostel") (ed and trans Stokes 1902:26-7), one of the *gessa* ("taboos" or "proscriptions") of the "king of *Ériu*" is that he is not to go *desúil*

around Tara, implying that this was exceptional, an inversion of the normally-accepted practice. Several hagiographical sources include references to the practice of going *desiul* (or *deisel*) as a sign of honour or to bring good luck, and to the unlucky properties of the reverse motion, going *tuaithbel* - left-hand-wise or widdershins (see refs in Plummer 1910, 1:cxxxv).

Indeed, the account in *Lebor brecc* (quoted on p 294) of the ritual procession around the boundary at the foundation of the Church of Armagh explicitly states that it went "*dessel*". It is this form of motion, the right hand or south turn, which appears to characterize the route of the possible circumambulatory way within Armagh (pp 299-300). The symbolic significance of this postulated route and the ritual processions which may have been associated with it is that the worshippers would have progressed along the circumambulatory way with their right shoulders towards the *Raith* - at the centre of which stood the church allegedly founded by, and dedicated to, St Patrick - investing within it the sacrality and beneficence derived from the right-hand-side (cf Simpson 1896:75,90,183). By contrast, outside the *Raith* stood St Brigit's Church, which, by virtue of its location to the left of any procession following the possible circumambulatory way, may have been perceived to have been subjected to the evil and hostile forces of chaos which are associated with that side (cf Hertz 1909; trans Needham 1973:13,15):

... the community forms a closed circle at the center of which is the altar, the Ark of the Covenant, where the gods descend and from which place divine aid radiates. Within the enclosure reign order and harmony, while outside it extends a vast night, limitless and lawless, full of impure germs and traversed by chaotic forces. On the periphery of the sacred space the worshippers make a ritual circuit round the divine center, their right shoulders turned towards it. They have everything to hope for from one side, everything to fear from the other. The right is the *inside*, the finite, assumed well-being, and certain peace; the left is the *outside*, the infinite, hostile, and the perpetual menace of evil.



....

The gods are on our right, so we turn towards the right to pray.... To bring about good effects in a ceremony, to bless or to consecrate, the Hindus and the Celts go three times round a person or an object, from left to right, like the sun, with the right side turned inwards. In this way they pour upon whatever is enclosed within the sacred circle the holy and beneficent virtue which emanates from the right side. The contrary movement and attitude, in similar circumstances, would be sacriligious and unlucky.

Although it is not specified what direction it took, it may be noted that a ritual circumambulation was integral to the destruction of the walls of Jericho (Joshua 6:1-20).

In addition to this, the status of Armagh's form as an *imago mundi* permits another ideological dimension to be identified within the postulated circumambulatory ritual. By the nature of its spatial organization, Armagh represents the material manifestation of the cosmos and its power (cf Wheatley 1971:433). The community of Armagh, by the periodic circumambulation of the city, could have demonstrated symbolically their pre-eminent status within the cosmos, their mastery over it (cf Hocart 1924:110), and the incorporation of those cosmic powers within the centre of the cult of St Patrick. This may be analogous to the symbolism of those later mythological accounts of royal circuits, such as the twelfth century "The Circuit of Ireland by Muirchertach mac Néill" (ed and trans O'Donovan 1841). By implication, therefore, the ritual procession around Armagh was both an invocation and a statement of Armagh's primacy.

The examples of the ideological significance of cosmology and the construction of the past within a secular context which are considered in chapters two and three are vague and generalized in nature. Within secular ideological strategies monuments simply appear to be portrayed - through literature, poetry and the actions associated with them - as,

for example, the fort or burial mound of kings belonging to the immemorial past. This contrasts markedly with the ideological nature of the cosmological schemes and constructed pasts which are evident within an ecclesiastical context, at least as far as Armagh is concerned.

The ideological strategy of Armagh's claim of ecclesiastical primacy, as revealed in literary sources and the spatial organization of the ecclesiastical settlement itself, is specific, precise and highly complex. It draws on both Biblical and Classical, as well as what are presumably pagan Irish, prototypes. Indeed, the ideology of Armagh's claim exhibits a concern with origins, chronology, spatial organization and divine power which reveals it to be the specific product of a learned and literate cultural milieu. Although this appears to have pervaded so many aspects of early historic Armagh, its complexity is such that it seems likely that it would have to have been made apparent to, or interpreted for, visitors and pilgrims to Armagh. The ideological statements which the spatial organization and its associations appear to convey are likely to have been too complex to have been appreciated by someone simply wandering through the city.

This leads back to some of the themes which are considered in this and the previous chapter. For example, the spatial organization of the ecclesiastical settlement, and its boundary markers and gateways in particular, would have had the effect of restricting access to the sacred centre. People could not simply wander about the city, but were presumably channelled and directed through the ecclesiastical settlement in a carefully predetermined way by these features. Indeed, this is still the case in Vicars' Hill, and the drop in ground level and the iron railings which today bar access along this route to and from the



cathedral may - like the street-plan itself - fossilize a much earlier barrier to access (p 299). The most likely manner in which the ideological statements of the spatial organization were realized is through processions - leading people around the city and inculcating in them the significance of the relative locations of the churches, the orientations of boundaries and of spatial units, their names and dedications. This compliments the postulated circumambulatory ritual, the existence of which is inferred from the form of the boundaries fossilized within the Medieval and modern street-plan (pp 299-300) and hagiographical accounts of the procession which delineated the ecclesiastical boundary at the founding of the Church of Armagh.

As a repetition of the primordial act of foundation by St Patrick and the angel Victoricus, such a procession would have been associated expressly with the past. By virtue of its celebration, therefore, the legitimation of both the past and of divine sanction was accorded to the pre-eminence of the cult of St Patrick. Presumably reinforced by seasonal festivals and daily rituals, and emphasized by hagiographical literature, the form of the city referred to a supramundane conception and a venerable antiquity which were intended to further the political aspirations of Armagh in its quest for ecclesiastical primacy.

## **PART THREE**

### **CONCLUSIONS**



## CHAPTER SIX

### CONCLUSIONS: THE CONSTRUCTION AND INTERPRETATION OF THE PAST, PAST AND PRESENT

This study concerns the significance of monuments within the cultural landscape of early historic Ireland. Its theme is the manner in which earlier, often prehistoric, archaeological sites within the landscape were perceived within early historic Irish society and the ideological significance - within both secular and ecclesiastical contexts - of the investment of meaning and value in these sites. This is, within the definition adopted in this study, the essence of what constitutes a monument - a structure which is perceived to belong to the past and yet possesses a contemporary socio-political significance (pp 26-30).

That monuments were perceived to be of significance during the early historic period is indicated by their prominence within a range of literary genres and their association with various types of activity, including battles and *óenaíge* (pp 71-4, 132-5, 137-49). The manner in which certain monuments were perceived by later societies is attested in some literary sources. These include the portrayal of some monuments as having specific functions. For example, Navan Fort and Tara - in the

forms of *Emain Macha* and *Temair na Ríogh* respectively - are depicted in the *dindshenchas*, epic literature and, in the latter case, some hagiographical sources, as the fortified royal centres of the over-king of the *cóiced* of *Ulaid* and the high-king of Ireland respectively.

The later significance of monuments is also manifested in the archaeological record. Quantities of later artefacts have been recovered from earlier monuments (pp 4-5, 29, 35, 376-8) or their immediate vicinity, as in the case of the penannular brooches and amphora fragments found close to Navan Fort (pp 149-54). Alternatively, the later importance of a site may be inferred from its association with structures of the early historic period, such as the fortified settlement of the *Síl nÁedo Sláine* kings of north Brega, which actually occupies the mound of one of the great Neolithic passage tombs in the Bend of the Boyne, Knowth (Byrne 1968; Eogan 1977; forthcoming; pp 12, 145, above). In a similar manner, the largest enclosure on the Hill of Tara, *Ráth na Ríogh*, contains within its interior two small banked and ditched enclosures which may belong to the early historic period, one of which, in turn, incorporates what appear to be one or two earlier funerary mounds within its earthworks (pp 84-5, 94-5). A less obvious, but nevertheless significant, relationship may occur in those cases where later settlements, including ecclesiastical foundations, appear to be sited not on or adjacent to pre-existing monuments, but in close proximity to them, as in the case of Navan Fort and the Church of Armagh (pp 189-93).

These phenomena, the association of later activity with, and the perception of, monuments, are considered here as manifestations of the construction of the past. The past possesses no inherent form or characteristics. Rather, it exists solely in relation to the present.



The past, therefore, is a product of the present (pp 43-8). This is most vividly exemplified in the concept of a "golden" or "heroic" age, which is set in a seemingly timeless past, but constructed in a present. This is a psychological and literary phenomenon which is common to many societies (pp 173-4), and may be manifested in the episodes of the Ulster Cycle. Although set in a pagan past, these epic tales appear to be literary products of the early historic period (pp 155-71).

Such sources, therefore, do not depict the past as an objective reality, but as a constructed medium. This is evident in many literary genres of the early historic period. For instance, hagiography is in many ways analogous to epic literature, with saints and their aggressive proselytizing constituting the (in some cases only nominally) Christian counterpart of the (ostensibly) pagan heroes and their heroic deeds (pp 185-6). The *dindshenchas*, too, are concerned with a constructed past, in which the primordial actions of mythological kings, queens, heroes and quasi-divine beings effectively create the cultural landscape, including the monuments, of early historic Ireland (pp 24-6,32). Similarly, genealogical sources may represent a constructed past. As a means of demonstrating the legitimacy of dynastic claims or the tenure of royal office, genealogies are open to manipulation for ideological motives. That this is indeed the case is evident from the transformed, contradictory or fabricated nature of the relationships documented in many genealogical sources (pp 165-6).

The various annalistic compilations also contain constructions of the past. The annals comprise annual entries which, by around the mid-seventh century, are approximately contemporaneous with the events which they record (pp 39-45). However, some of the annals, most notably the

Annals of the Four Masters (although this is a Medieval compilation [p 381]), contain mythological entries at the beginning of the sequence, as well as retrospective entries, possibly including those which record the celebrations of the Feast of Tara (pp 42-3).

The annals indicate the potential complexity of constructions of the past and the existence of different concepts of time in early historic Ireland. For instance, sources such as the epic literature and *dindsenchas* appear to embody a concept of time which may be characterized as "mythological". Indeed, mythological time appears to be "timeless" in the sense that it is fluid and reversible - cyclical. Within this, events do not seem to bear a fixed chronological relationship to each other and cause and effect are indistinguishable. This is the concept of time which is embodied in the epic literature, and may help to explain the apparent contradictions and inconsistencies which often occur in texts such as the episodes of the Ulster Cycle. This notion of time may be equated with Leach's (1954:115-20) concept of "primitive time".

In contrast, the annals, with their sequential ordering of annual entries (although the order of entries under a specific year may not be chronological), embody a concept of time which is linear and unidirectional and which corresponds with Leach's (1954:120-7) notion of "historical time". This concept of time is a consequence of the introduction of literacy because it is a product of the keeping of records, originally in the form of notes added to Easter tables (Ó Cróinín 1983), and may have been derived from Classical chronologies (pp 33-4, 135-6; cf Goody 1977:45), "... the concept of chronology is linear rather than circular; it needs numbered series starting with a fixed base, which



means that some form of graphic record is a prerequisite". It is in the mythological prologues of some annalistic compilations that one may detect an attempt to reconcile these two concepts of time, primitive and historical, and to integrate the types of knowledge contained within them. This appears to be the preoccupation of the "synchronizing historians" of the early historic and Medieval periods (pp 43-4).

A notable characteristic of all these sources, mythological and historical, is the frequency and prominence with which monuments feature. Several *dindshenchas* specifically concern monuments, for example, those concerning *Emain Macha* (ed and trans Stokes 1895a:279-83; Gwynn 1924: 308-11). These sources present interpretations of the origins, construction and names of these structures and associate them with various mythological characters. Monuments are integral to many epic tales, including several of those belonging to the Ulster Cycle, in which the large earthwork enclosure of Navan Fort is portrayed as *Emain Macha*, the fortified court of the *rí Ulad* and the feasting place of the Ulster heroes. Monuments also feature in some annalistic entries, where they appear as the scenes of battles, royal meetings, *déanaige*, the promulgation of laws and, presumably, the Feast of Tara (pp 42-3, 71-4, 132-49, 178).

The prominence accorded to monuments in these sources appears to attest the influence which they exerted on the consciousness of early Irish society. Conspicuous monuments dominate the landscape of many parts of Ireland today and it must be considered that, before the depredations of agriculture and other human activities over many centuries, monuments were even more prominent within the early historic landscape.

The socio-political context and implication of monument construction has been considered by a number of writers, primarily in relation to the chambered tombs, causewayed enclosures and henges of Neolithic Wessex (eg Renfrew 1973; Startin and Bradley 1981). However, whilst giving some consideration to the role of monuments within the societies which constructed them, archaeologists have tended not to concern themselves with the manner in which monuments were perceived by later societies and the significance invested in them, although Bradley (1984; 1985:1-20; 1987b) makes an opening contribution. And yet, by not confronting this, archaeologists are denying themselves an approach to the study of the past which is of potentially considerable importance and which may have far-reaching implications for the study of both the structures concerned and those later societies which may have invested meaning and value in them.

Two examples of the implications of such an approach may be cited. Cairn H at Loughcrew, Co Meath (IGR N 585775), has every appearance of being a Neolithic passage tomb, and belongs to an extensive cemetery of such tombs which occupies the triple peaks of the Loughcrew Hills or Slieve na Calliagh. Excavation of the tomb in the mid-1860s and again in 1943, however, yielded thousands of fragments of bone blades or plaques (sometimes also described as "trial pieces") (Conwell 1866b:363-4; 1873:52-6; Rotherham 1896; Crawford 1914; 1925; Armstrong 1923:33; Raftery 1984:251-7). Some of these bear decorations in the distinctive La Tene style, dating them to about the first century BC or first century AD (ibid:258-63). Other Iron Age artefacts, including glass and amber beads, bronze rings, bone combs and iron tools were also found inside the tomb (Conwell 1866b:364; Rotherham 1896:258; Raftery 1953:286).



Most remarkably of all, however, some of the bone plaques were found in what appear to be primary contexts within the tomb, such as the basal deposits between the passage and the chamber and even the fill of a socket of one of the passage orthostats (ibid:287; I am indebted to Ross Samson for the translation):

*Unter dieser braunen Schicht lag eine feste graue Lehmschicht und darunter gewachsener Boden. Auf der Oberfläche des grauen Lehms wurden einige weitere Knochenplättchen gefunden, und einige weitere solche Plättchen lagen in der Fundgrube eines der noch stehenden Orthostaten des Ganges.*

(Under this brown layer lay a solid grey loam layer and under this was the natural soil. On the top of the grey loam a few more bone tools were found and a further few lay in the foundation pit of one the still standing orthostats in the passage.)

Raftery concludes from this that the tomb was constructed at the beginning of the first millennium AD. This is not an isolated example of the dating of a monument being based on the discovery of apparently later artefacts within it. For example, the discovery of a bivalve sandstone mould for a late Bronze Age spearhead within the cairn covering the wedge tomb of Labbanasighe, at Moylisha, Co Wicklow, led the excavator to conclude that the construction of the tomb dates to the late Bronze Age (Ó h-Íceadha 1946:127). However, these structures are usually dated to the early Bronze Age (Ó Ríordáin 1979:128).

While Raftery's interpretation has met some scepticism (eg Evans 1966:172), a detailed case refuting it cannot be made in the absence of a full excavation report. Nevertheless, analogies suggest an alternative, and perhaps more plausible, interpretation of the evidence. The association of artefactual deposits with a Neolithic passage tomb during the early centuries AD is also attested at Newgrange, Co Meath (pp 4-5, 35-6). There, Roman coins and jewellery were deposited in front of the entrance to the tomb, in what appear to have been a number of deposits

(Carson and O'Kelly 1977:41), presumably made over a period of time (p 35). No evidence of the disturbance of the passage or chamber of the tomb during the Iron Age has been detected but, given the scale of the covering mound, it is possible that this was never attempted. The Bronze Age cairn within the interior of the enclosure on Freestone Hill, Co Kilkenny, however, does appear to have been disturbed during the Iron Age. In fact, most of it seems to have been removed and its surviving basal layers then covered with a deposit which comprised ironworking debris and Iron Age and Roman artefacts, including a late Imperial coin (Raftery 1969). These deposits suggest the cairn to have been invested with (presumably ritual) significance during the Iron Age, contrary to the impression which may be created by its partial destruction. In addition, a number of analogies may be cited from Roman Britain, in which the deposition of Roman coins *within* Neolithic and Bronze Age burial mounds (Piggott 1962:55-6; Grinsell 1967:20-5; Robertson 1974:26) must have resulted in their disturbance (Aitchison 1988:276).

These examples, from both Ireland and Britain, attest the association of later activity with earlier monuments. This apparently consists of the ritual deposition of artefacts during the late Bronze Age and Iron Age. Awareness of this potential dimension of the archaeological record of Neolithic and early Bronze Age funerary monuments at the very least has the effect of enabling "extraneous" artefacts to be disregarded when it comes to assessing the dating evidence of such sites. More than this, however, it also attests an interesting and important dimension of these sites in terms of their perceived significance to later societies. The examples outlined here belong to later prehistory, rather than the early historic period, and



that of Cairn H at Loughcrew may be exceptional. Nevertheless, these sites demonstrate that monuments may be invested with meaning and value by later societies, and that that significance may be detected in the archaeological record. They also demonstrate the wider relevance of this phenomenon - the later significance of monuments - and that its existence is not confined to the early historic period. This study, however, has concentrated on the early historic period because the availability of relevant literary sources enables a more detailed analysis to be undertaken, including a consideration of the relationship - or discrepancy - which exists between historical narrative and archaeological expectation.

In addition, this study concentrates on the construction of the past as it is manifested in the case of a small number of monuments. These were selected on the basis partly of the ready availability and quality of a range of types of evidence - archaeological, historical and mythological. A further consideration was to seek sites which may provide correlates of political evolution, that is, sites which have traditionally been associated with levels of political organization which are thought to have emerged during the first millennium AD. These are principally the "provincial" over-kingships and the high-kingship of Ireland. These factors have led to the concentration of this research on a group of sites which were perceived to possess a fundamental political and/or religious importance in early historic Ireland. These are the royal centres (and Navan Fort in particular), which are traditionally regarded as the royal courts of the "provincial" kings. A detailed analysis of Armagh, the alleged foundation of St Patrick and emergent

primatial seat of all Ireland, enables similar themes to be examined within the context of ecclesiastical politics and ideology.

This selectivity may be justified not only on the basis of the evidence available but also on the grounds that past societies themselves display a selectivity in the investment of meaning and value in earlier structures. Not all such structures appear to have been perceived as important. Taking Bradley's (1987b:7) example of the Anglian palace complex at Yeavering, Northumberland, for example, it may be noted that:

... the stone circle and the ring ditch were reused during the post-Roman period, when they certainly formed focal points in the layout of the palace complex. On the other hand, they were not the major points in the *prehistoric* layout of the site, for here the henge monument had played a more important role than the ring ditch. It is surely revealing that the henge, originally the largest of the prehistoric monuments at Yeavering, was completely disregarded, whilst the others became the sites for two cemeteries. Undoubtedly an attempt was made to renew links with the past through the reuse of the stone circle and the ring ditch, but the treatment of the henge monument, and the creation of a totally new axis for the buildings on the site, suggest that this was done with little knowledge of how the area had once been used.

This may be analogous to the ecclesiastical occupation of Cathedral Hill, which may have regarded as insignificant the hollow of the Iron Age ditch there (p 229) there. Although this feature may have indicated to the founders of the Church of Armagh the presence of past human activity on the hill-top, which may in itself be significant, the ditch hollow was further infilled during the early historic period and appears to have exerted little or no influence on the boundaries of the ecclesiastical settlement (pp 255-6). However, it should be emphasized that these examples do not constitute "misunderstandings" of the past (cf Wailes 1982:21; pp 101-2, above). Rather, they represent the selective appropriation and interpretation of structures from a later



perspective and with a specific ideological function in mind - that is, the construction of the past.

Navan Fort illustrates well the problems which have beset the archaeological interpretation of this site as a result of its significance to later societies. Navan Fort is portrayed in early literary sources as *Emain Macha*, the fortified royal centre of the kings of the *cóiced* of *Ulaíd*. This function it retained until, according to traditional sources, it was taken and destroyed by the three Collas, heralding the eclipse of *Ulaíd* power west of *Glenn Ríge* (pp 175-7). This event is fixed variously by the synchronizing historians at between AD 327 and AD 450 (Byrne 1973:73; below).

These sources initially appear to provide a convenient interpretation of, and a terminal date of occupation for, Navan Fort. However, they are contradicted by the evidence of excavation, which suggests that Navan Fort was an enclosed centre of ritual activity during later prehistory. The latest structural activity detected by excavation occurred c 100 BC, shortly before a swift phase of destruction, although it should be noted that the site has not been fully excavated (pp 92-4).

This apparent anomaly between archaeological expectation and literary narrative is readily accounted for once the epic literature is appreciated as being mythological in nature and set in the past (pp 155-6, 169-71). These sources comprise constructions of the past, in which later occupants of the landscape seek to rationalize their surroundings by offering interpretations of the more conspicuous elements within the cultural landscape and then attempting to integrate these often disparate strands of information (pp 24-6, 43-5). This explains the different dates which are given for the "fall of *Emain*" in those

mythological or retrospective entries within the annals (eg AFM sa 331; AU am 4334. The former is quoted on pp 176-7) and once again reveals the hand of the synchronizing historians.

One of the most far-reaching developments in the study of early Irish history has been the more critical evaluation of evidence, enabling historical sources to be distinguished from mythological ones with greater clarity and confidence. This in turn has facilitated the stripping of an accretion of mythologically-based "facts" and assumptions. These pervade the Irish past and previously tended to obscure many aspects of early Irish history. One of the most lucid examples of this demythologizing is Binchy's (1958a) study of the Feast of Tara and the *Óenach Tailten*. In this, Binchy convincingly dismisses the interpretation of the *Feis Temro* and *Óenach Tailtiu* as "national assemblies" associated with the high-kingship, in favour of their status as the pagan inauguration ceremony of the kingship of Tara and the annual assembly of the southern *Uí Néill* respectively. The significance of this is that it enables the ideological dimension of these events, and the sources in which they are portrayed, to be appreciated. For example, the *Uí Néill* appear to have sought to portray the *Óenach Tailten* as Ireland's immemorial national assembly - over which the over-king of the *Uí Néill* presided - as part of their ideological strategy aimed at establishing and legitimizing a high-kingship of all Ireland.

Archaeologists, however, perhaps as a result of their lack of formal training in the use of textual evidence, do not appear to distinguish so readily between historical and mythological sources. This is particularly evident in the case of Navan Fort, even in the presence of excavated evidence which contradicts the interpretations derived from



accepting mythological sources at face value. Despite the reappraisal of the function and chronology of this site which the results of excavation have made possible, it is still commonly described as an historical royal residence and provincial capital, rather than as a later focus of royal activity. For example, the Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland's official guide to sites in state care states of Navan Fort in a matter-of-fact manner that it is the "Site identified as *Eamhain Macha*, chief residence of the Kings of Ulster and prominent in heroic literature and legend, traditionally destroyed in 332 AD" (DoENI 1983:80). This is at least potentially misleading, which the reference to legend does not dispel. Legend, no matter how embellished or exaggerated, is based on historical fact and is therefore very different in significance, though not always easily differentiated in form, from mythology.

A more blatant example of the perpetuation of the mythologically-inspired interpretation of Navan Fort is promoted by the booklet *Navan Fort: the Ancient Capital of Ulster* (Mallory nd a). As if the title alone were not enough, it goes on to describe Navan Fort as "... the ancient capital of Ulster, its first historical place, the seat of its ancient kings when the power of Ulster was at its greatest, the pagan spiritual and political centre of the province, the inspiration of its greatest works of literature...". This appears to be an issue of cause and effect, but if the composition of the epic tales of the Ulster Cycle does belong to the early historic period, as it would appear to do (Aitchison 1987; pp 155-71, above) and as Mallory (nd b) himself appears to believe, then it is not the fortified provincial royal centre which inspired the composition of the epic literature. Rather, the portrayal

of *Emain Macha* appears to be based on the conspicuous earthworks of Navan Fort and comprises an interpretation of those earthworks. The ancient capital itself is a literary creation and yet Mallory's (and a; emphasis mine) only recognition of this is that "The tales also describe in wonderful *but exaggerated* detail the magnificent palace that once stood at *Emain Macha*".

The failure here, and it is one which pervades the study of early historic Ireland, is to make a strong enough distinction between history and mythology, between Navan Fort and *Emain Macha*. The basis of this distinction is, or should be, that the former comprises the archaeological site; and the latter the mythological literary creation which was constructed around the site. Thus, it is Navan Fort which constitutes the physical remains of the past and *Emain Macha* which represents the mythological past which was constructed around those remains. This is a very real distinction and one which is central to the understanding not only of the concept and significance of the construction of the past but also, by facilitating the removal of mythological accretions from archaeological interpretation, is fundamental to the understanding of the archaeological record itself.

Mallory's booklet is a popularized account of Navan Fort, its environs and their significance, although the interpretations which it presents appears to be typical of those advocated in more academic publications (eg Evans 1966:60; Norman and St Joseph 1969:73; Ó Ríordáin 1979:23; O'Kelly 1989:316-7, 319, 327). Its publication was intended to arouse interest in Navan Fort and present the case for the (ultimately successful) campaign against the extension of the limestone quarry adjacent to the site. To this extent it is successful, but at a price,



because it conveys to the public little of the complexity of the evidence - archaeological, historical and mythological - and nothing of the distinction between historical and mythological sources. In fact, it presents Navan Fort as something - the fortified royal capital of ancient Ulster - which never existed outwith the mythological tales and the popular imagination. Not only is this misleading, but it actually weakens the case for the preservation of Navan Fort because it denies the significance of evidence which attests the importance of Navan Fort to later occupants of the landscape over many centuries, and not solely to the archaeologists and historians of today.

Indeed, the manner in which Navan Fort is still described and, more critically, presented to members of the public, is disturbing. The boldness and vision of the Navan Fort Initiative Group's "Navan at Armagh" proposal to promote Navan Fort and its surroundings as a major tourist attraction, including a "Navan heritage centre" (Mallory 1987c) or "visitor centre and archaeological park" (NFIG 1988) are to be admired. However, there must surely be a lingering apprehension that the site's presentation to the public will result not only in the glossing over of the complexity of the archaeological, historical and mythological evidence relating to the site, but also the manipulation of that evidence to convey an "understanding" of Navan Fort and its environs which cannot legitimately be sustained by the evidence.

Navan Fort, it seems, present two instructive lessons in archaeological interpretation. The first is that mythological sources, and these include epic literature and the *díndshenchas*, can never be accepted at face value. Mythology is concerned not with facts but with truths. Unlike facts, truths can never be established objectively, but

are encapsulated within specific social and historical contexts. Truths include, for example, the establishment of social origins and classifications of the natural world which are not empirically founded but rather are culturally defined.

The second point to emerge from the study of Navan Fort, Armagh and their environs is that the landscape has a strong temporal dimension, not only from the perspective of modern archaeologists and historians, but also from that of past societies. This may seem an obvious point, but it is one which cannot be overstated. In a society such as that of early historic Ireland, which placed such paramount importance on ancestry, genealogical links and social origins, attitudes to and perceptions of the past are prominent in both the literary sources and the archaeological record.

One possible risk in approaching the study, say, of Navan Fort and its environs as a "ritual landscape" (Mallory and a) or "ritual complex" (Warner 1986:5) is that it diminishes the significance of its temporal dimension. Warner (1986:8) is quite right to deny any suggestion of continuity of activity at Navan Fort and its surroundings, "... the sites and objects from the area cover the whole span of time from the Neolithic to the late Medieval period (perhaps as much as 6500 years). This is not to say use of the area was continuous. Rather I would see periods of intensive use (for instance the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age), periods of less intensive use, and undoubtedly periods in which activity was hardly, if at all, present". However, Warner (1986:8) claims that Navan Fort and its neighbouring sites may be termed "a 'complex' (a collection of functionally interrelated sites)" because of their high status and ritual associations. And yet, these sites could



hardly have been "functionally interrelated" for the duration of the "ritual complex", which, as Warner himself points out, may cover a period of up to 6500 years. Indeed, it is only Navan Fort which, alone of all these sites, exhibits a long, though not continuous, sequence of activity. Evidence from the other sites appear to attest ritual activity during only one period, for example, the Kings' Stables during the late Bronze Age (Lynn 1977c; 1988a) and Loughnashade during the Iron Age (p 4).

What appears to give the impression of the existence of a "complex" of sites is the concentration of ritual activity in a comparatively small area at intervals over a long period of time and, secondly, the manner in which this area is portrayed in the literary sources of the early historic period. The status of Navan Fort and its surroundings as the physical focus of the tales of the Ulster Cycle and the setting for many of the activities of its heroes gives the area and its sites a sense of a shared and contemporary significance. In a sense they do possess a shared and contemporary significance, but only as a literary construct, expressed through the medium of the epic literature and the *dindsenchas*. This is in itself a manifestation of the investment of meaning and value in earlier sites. This is underlined by Warner's exclusion of Armagh from the area covered by his preliminary schedule of sites within the Navan "complex". Armagh lies adjacent to the area of the Navan complex. The chronological and typological range of its sites includes a stone circle (p 258), a Neolithic ring ditch (Lynn 1988b), an Iron Age hill-top enclosure and probable cult centre (pp 191,231-48) , early ecclesiastical foundations and the major ecclesiastical settlement (pp 248-88). In addition, one of the features listed in Warner's (1986;

7) schedule, the possible "ancient road", runs from Navan Fort to Cathedral Hill. Despite this, a seemingly artificial exclusion of Armagh from the study of the "Navan complex" appears to have been made. However, the toponymic evidence - *Ard Macha* and *Emain Macha* - and some of the literary sources relating to both sites appears to indicate that the two hill-tops were perceived to be associated, at least during the early historic period, even if they did have different histories and were invested with sometimes opposing meaning and value (pp 186-95). Rather than Navan Fort constituting the focus of a "ritual complex" of restricted area, it seems that both Navan Fort and Armagh comprised twin or dual foci within a much more extensive cultural landscape.

The concept of a "complex" of sites, therefore, appears to be one which, in this particular case, cannot be applied to a group of sites in use at a specific moment in time. Rather, it arises from the construction of the past and the association of later activity with monuments. Indeed, this may be strengthened by the recent suggestion that the earthworks of Navan Fort actually comprise a Neolithic henge monument (Simpson 1989), the subsequent investment of meaning in which is attested by the evidence of late Bronze Age and Iron Age activity in its interior and its royal associations and portrayal during the early historic period.

The "ritual continuity" of sites is a theme which Bradley (1987b) has recently considered, primarily in relation to the Anglian palace complex at Yeavering, Northumberland. Of the evidence from Yeavering and elsewhere, Bradley (1987b:4-5) states that "... the strategic reuse of monuments surviving from the distant past and their incorporation in a different cultural landscape.... provides a better explanation for some



of the patterns recognised in the archaeological record than the problematical notion of ritual continuity". Rather than Navan Fort and its environs being a "ritual complex", the area should be viewed as a cultural landscape, which incorporates archaeological sites of different types and different periods but the perception of which, and the investment of meaning and value in its elements - natural and man-made - gives the landscape an impression of the uniformity and coherency of its ritual status and function.

The concept of a ritual landscape, whether it be Navan Fort and its environs or the ecclesiastical topography of early historic Armagh, is also flawed in that it emphasizes the religious role of the landscape and its monuments at the expense of their ideological significance. Mythology is not concerned with the interpretation and classification of the cultural landscape as a result of an innate sense of human curiosity alone. The social environment is ordered by dominant socio-political groups (cf Duncan 1976). These elements alone within society can command the resources through which the landscape may be transformed, both physically, through the mobilization of labour to build (or destroy) structures within it, and cognitively, through the patronage of those learned individuals - poets and historians - who were actively engaged in the interpretation of the landscape and the dissemination of (constructed) knowledge concerning it. As a result, the landscape, and its monuments - enduring and conspicuous - in particular, is of ideological significance and a source of legitimate authority.

Where ritual is important, however, is in the concept of time in which it, and monuments, are perceived to exist. Ritual, in order to store and communicate social knowledge, tends to be very repetitive in

nature (Leach 1966:404-5). As a result, it is perceived to exist within a concept of cyclical time (cf Bloch 1977a:330). This is one reason why the calculation and regulation of time, as well as the chronicling of events, was of such importance to the early Church, as evidenced by the Irish annalistic tradition and the controversy over the Irish calculation of the date of Easter (on which see Hughes 1966:103-7; Harrison 1982).

Thus, within early historic Ireland one may identify the existence of two notions of time. Firstly, there is a concept of linear time which is uni-directional and irreversible. This is the notion of time which is embodied in the annals (pp 31,389) and appears to be the temporal context of secular activity. Ritual time, in contrast, is cyclical in conception and it is within this concept of time that both the annual *Óenaige* and Christian rites of varying frequency - daily, weekly, annually - existed.

Bloch (1977b:287) claims that these - cyclical and linear - are the two principal concepts of time, concepts which recur throughout different societies:

... cognition of society, like that of time, is double. On the one hand there is a system used in normal communication based on universal notions of time and cognition... a system which is used for the organization of practical activities... and on the other hand there is another totally different system... based on a stranger and much more culturally specific system of classification.

The presence of the past in the present is... one of the components of that *other system* of cognition which is characteristic of ritual communication, another world which unlike that manifested in the cognitive system of everyday communication does not directly link up with empirical experiences.

This may be of fundamental ideological significance within a hierarchical society (ibid:289):

Some inequality is often manifested as unadorned oppression, but ... it is then highly unstable, and only becomes stable when its origins are hidden and when it transforms itself into a hierarchy:



a legitimate order of inequality in an imaginary world which we call social structure. This is done by the creation of a mystified 'nature' and consisting of concepts and categories of time and persons divorced from everyday experience, and where inequality takes on the appearance of an inevitable part of an ordered system.

Concepts of time, therefore, are central to the role of the past in the present, the perception of monuments, and the ideological role of monuments - through their association with ritual activity - in legitimizing and promoting asymmetrical relations of power within society. The association of later royal and ritual activity - for example, *Óenaige* and possibly royal inauguration ceremonies, such as the *Feis Temro* may have been (Binchy 1958a:127-38) - is a manifestation neither of the continued ritual significance of a site, nor solely of the perceived former sacred status of a particular site. Rather, constructions of the past - and their physical referents, monuments - are of ideological significance. Because the past exists only in relation to the present, it is a malleable phenomenon.

In this context, one may note with interest, but dispute in part at least, Marx's statement, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1869; I owe the translation to Ross Samson), that:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.

The past is a product of the present, and in that sense men do make their own history. Not all men (and, one would presume, even fewer women), however, but only those who command sufficient authority and resources to promote and disseminate their constructions of the past in a more authoritative manner. The past, therefore, is open to the investment of meaning and value which may serve to promote the aspirations of

dominant socio-political groups within society. Thus, the past is of ideological significance in the sense that it comprises a constructed body of knowledge which serves to promote, maintain and extend relations of dominance within society. This is the essence of the construction of the past. As a consequence of the centralization of political power and the expansion of the influence and authority of certain ecclesiastical foundations, it is a prominent phenomenon within the archaeological record and literary sources of early historic Ireland and central to the understanding of the socio-political organization and evolution of that period.

"Ireland was odd in the early middle ages". In recent years several studies (cited in Wormald 1986:151,173, n 2) have sought to qualify Kathleen Hughes' (1973:21) famous dictum. The general tenor of these has been to concentrate not on the outlandish aspects of early historic Ireland (which undoubtedly exist), but instead to consider features of, and developments within, society, kingship and the Church from a wider cultural perspective. Such studies have sought to draw instructive parallels from analogous, sometimes even similar, phenomena in Anglo-Saxon England and/or on the continent, or have sought to consider the implications of those differences which existed between early historic Ireland and Anglo-Saxon England.

Odd, therefore, early historic Ireland may not have been, but there is one major sense in which Ireland - as well as Scotland - was unique within western Europe. Of course, any society may be said to be unique in the sense that it is the product of specific cultural and historical conditions. In the cases of Ireland and Scotland, however, that



historical context - unlike that of the rest of western Europe - did not include Roman conquest, occupation and incorporation within the Roman empire.

As a result of this, the historical context and cultural background of early historic Ireland were radically different. That this is likely to have had far-reaching consequences for both the manner in which the past was perceived and constructed is suggested by the emphasis which is placed on the legacy of Rome in Britain, England and on the continent. For example, the British Historical Miscellany (MS Harley 3859) refers to the legendary (or mythological?) Arthur as a "*dux bellorum*" ("duke [or 'leader'] of battles"), a late imperial official title (Alcock 1971: 60-1). Archaeologically, the legacy of Rome is attested in England and on the continent in the foundation of some of the earliest churches in the ruins of Roman forts and fortresses, as at York. Several of these formed the seats of bishoprics by the seventh century and, in time, developed into flourishing towns and cities. This phenomenon, of drawing on a link with both Rome and the past, also appears to be manifested in the seemingly deliberate, and not simply utilitarian, incorporation of Roman masonry and inscriptions within the fabric of some early churches, such as those incorporated within the Anglo-Saxon crypt at Hexham Abbey, Northumberland (Taylor and Taylor 1965:297-312). On the continent, it is possibly with Charlemagne and the Holy Roman Empire that the concept and ideological significance of the legacy of Rome reaches its peak.

Ireland, however, had no such link with Rome, no physical remains or titles with which to demonstrate or claim continuity from Rome, no Roman past. Thus, while the phenomenon of the mythical creation of the past is common to many societies, constructions of the past must be

considered to be highly culturally and historically specific. For example, despite some evidence of the significance invested in *some* of the prehistoric monuments at Yeavinger (pp 388-9), the monumental remains of the ancient British landscape do not appear to have been invested with an important ideological role in Anglo-Saxon England generally. This is in stark contrast to the significance which was accorded to some Neolithic and Iron Age monuments in early historic Ireland. This demonstrates the very specific nature of those examples of the construction of the past which are examined here. It is presumably partly because the cultural and historical background of early historic Ireland - with no Roman heritage, real or imagined - was so fundamentally different from that of the rest of western Europe that one sees such a deep and overt reliance upon a pagan and prehistoric past. This is attested, for example, in the emphasis placed on, and the construction of the past around, the impressive prehistoric monuments - such as Navan Fort - which dominated the cultural landscape of early historic Ireland. This is the key to the significance of monuments and the construction of the past in early historic Ireland, a significance invested in prehistoric monuments which is probably unparalleled within western Europe.



## BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ABBREVIATIONS

BAR: British Archaeological Reports

*Bull. Board Celtic Stud.: Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*

*Bull Ulster Place-Name Soc.: Bulletin of the Ulster Place-Name Society*

*Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies: Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*

*Current Archaeol.: Current Archaeology*

*Éigse: Éigse: a Journal of Irish Studies*

*Emania: Emania: Bulletin of the Navan Research Group*

*Ériu: Ériu: Journal of the School of Irish Learning, Dublin*

*Folk-Lore: Folk-Lore: a Quarterly Review of Myth, Tradition, Institution and Custom*

*J. Cork Hist. Archaeol. Soc.: Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*

*J. Royal Soc. Antiq. Ireland: Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*

*Man: Man: Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (new series)*

*Peritia: Peritia: Journal of the Medieval Academy of Ireland*

*Proc. British Acad.: Proceedings of the British Academy*

*Proc. Prehistoric Soc.: Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*

*Proc. Royal Irish Acad.: Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*

*Seanchas Ardmhacha: Seanchas Ardmhacha: Journal of the Armagh Diocesan  
Historical Society*

*Studies: Studies: an Irish Quarterly Review of Letters, Philosophy and  
Science*

*Trans. Royal Irish Acad.: Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy*

*Ulster J. Archaeol.: Ulster Journal of Archaeology*



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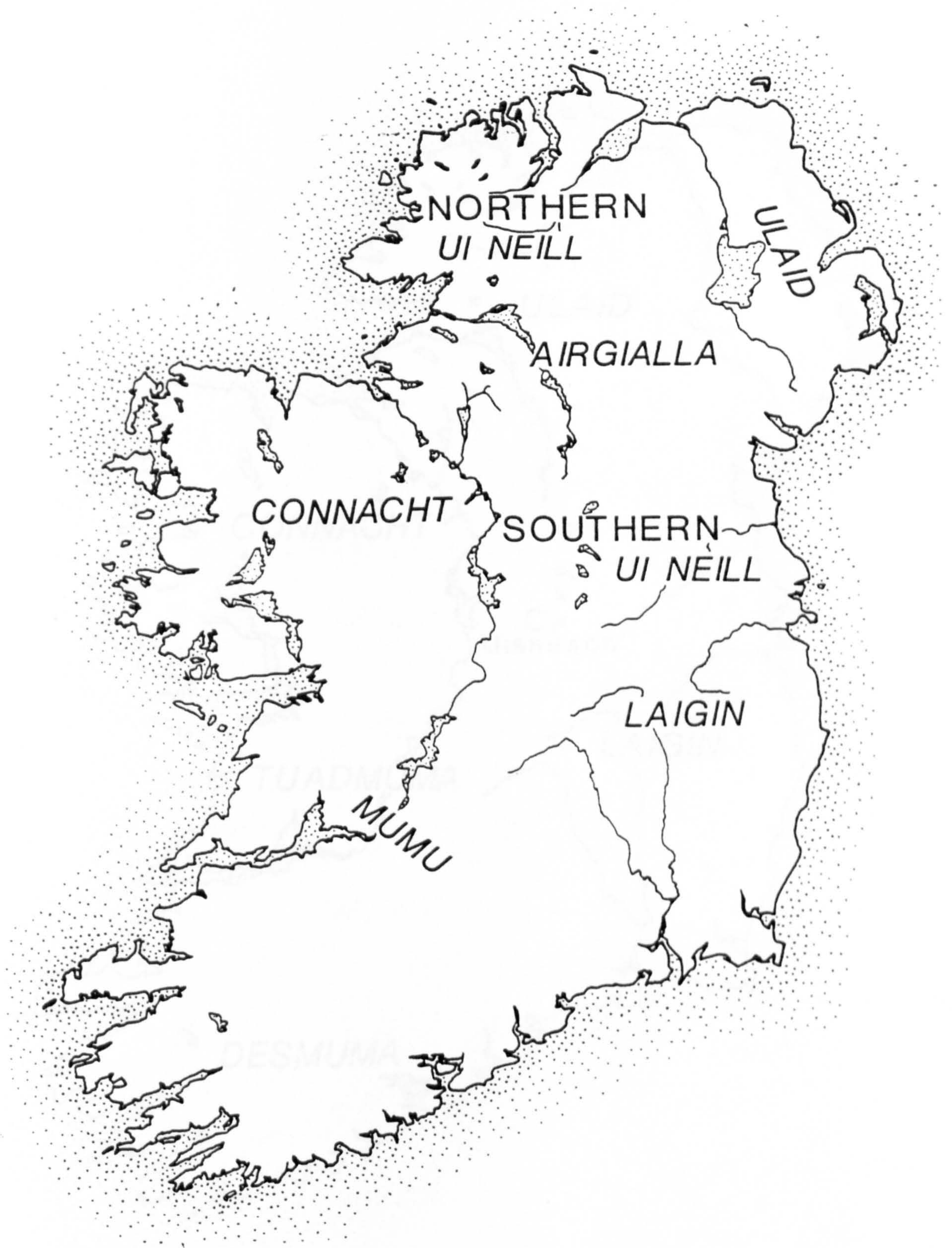


Fig 1. The seven-fold political division of early historic Ireland: the principal over-kingships.





Fig 2. The *cóiceda*, or five-fold cosmological division, incorporating the two Munsters.



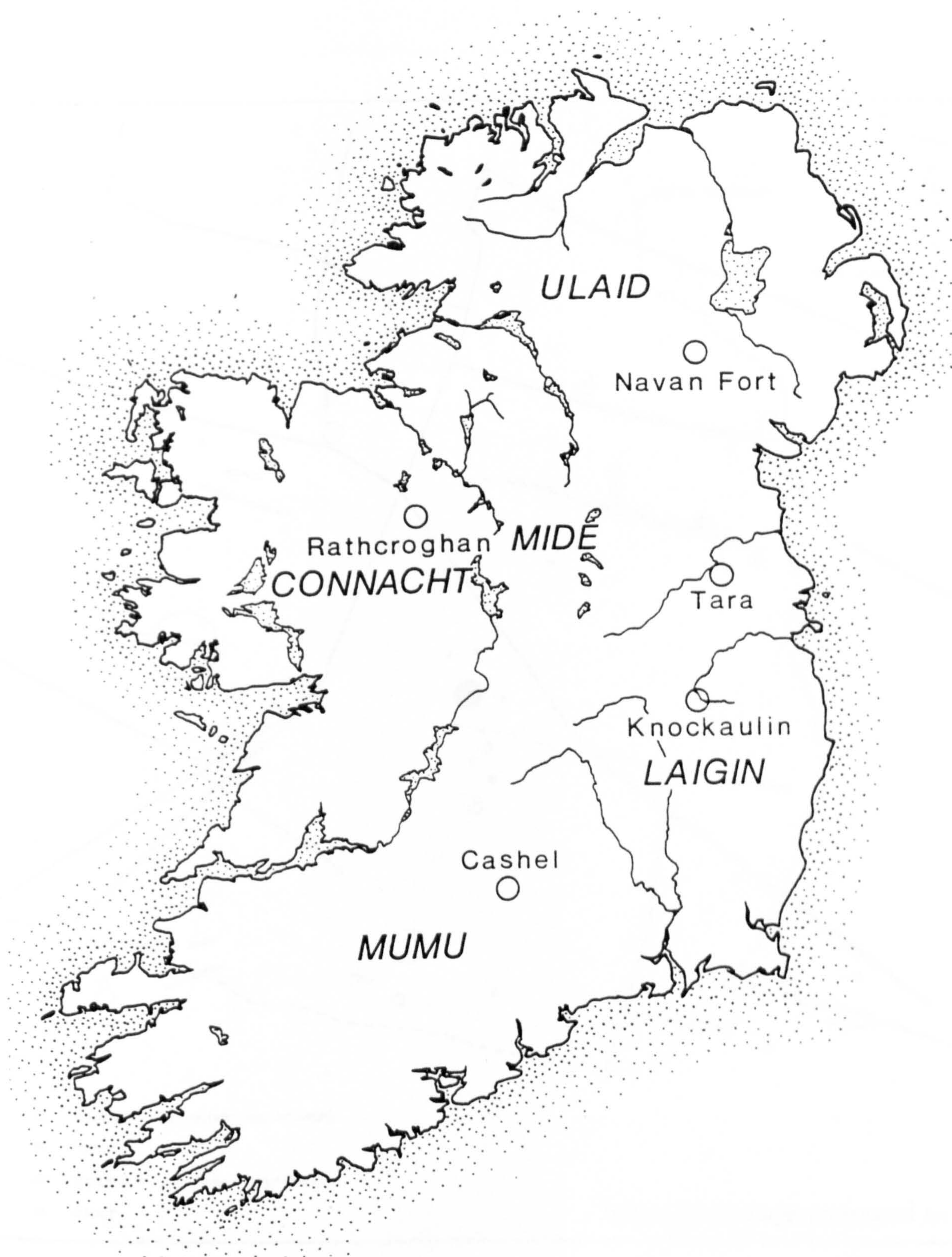


Fig 3. The *cóiceda*, or five-fold cosmological division, incorporating *Mide* as the central *cóiced* and showing the location of the royal centres.



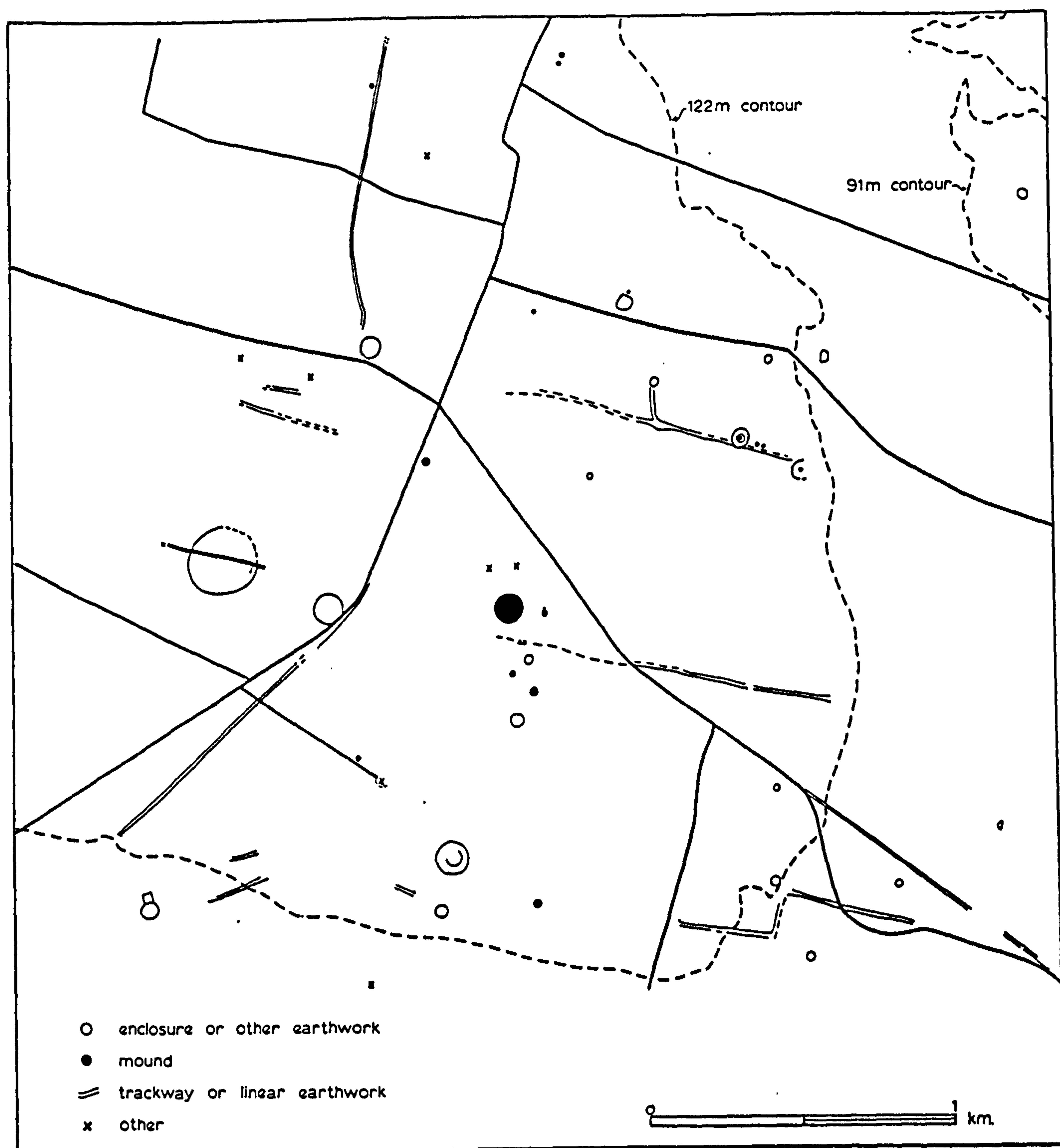


Fig 4. Plan of Rathcroghan, Co Roscommon. Rathcroghan mound is the large mound in the centre, while Relignaree is the bivalent enclosure in the bottom centre. (From Waddell 1983:28).



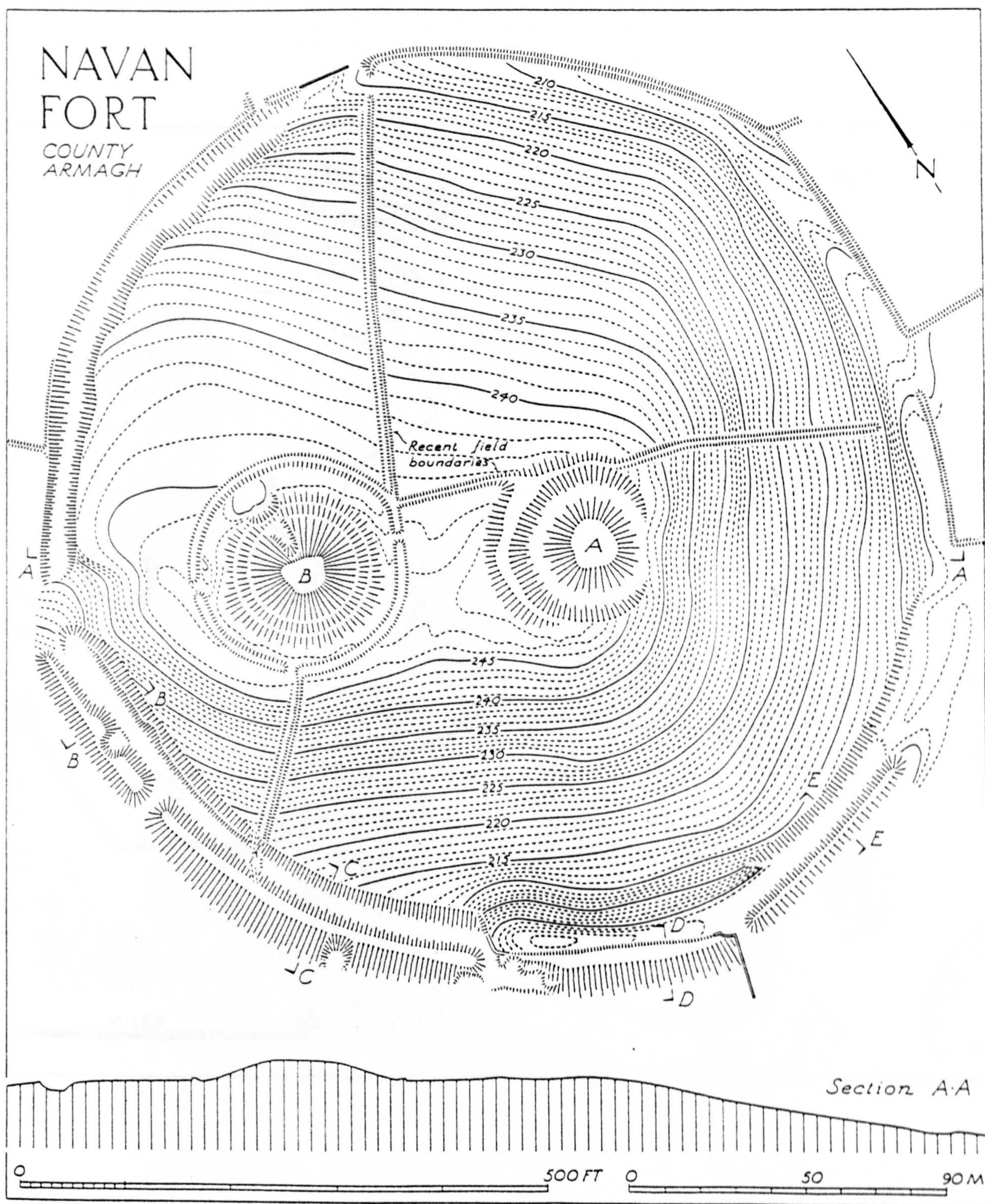


Fig 5. Plan of Navan Fort, Co Armagh. (Unpublished. Kindly supplied by C.Lynn, Archaeological Survey, Historic Buildings and Monuments Branch, DoENI).



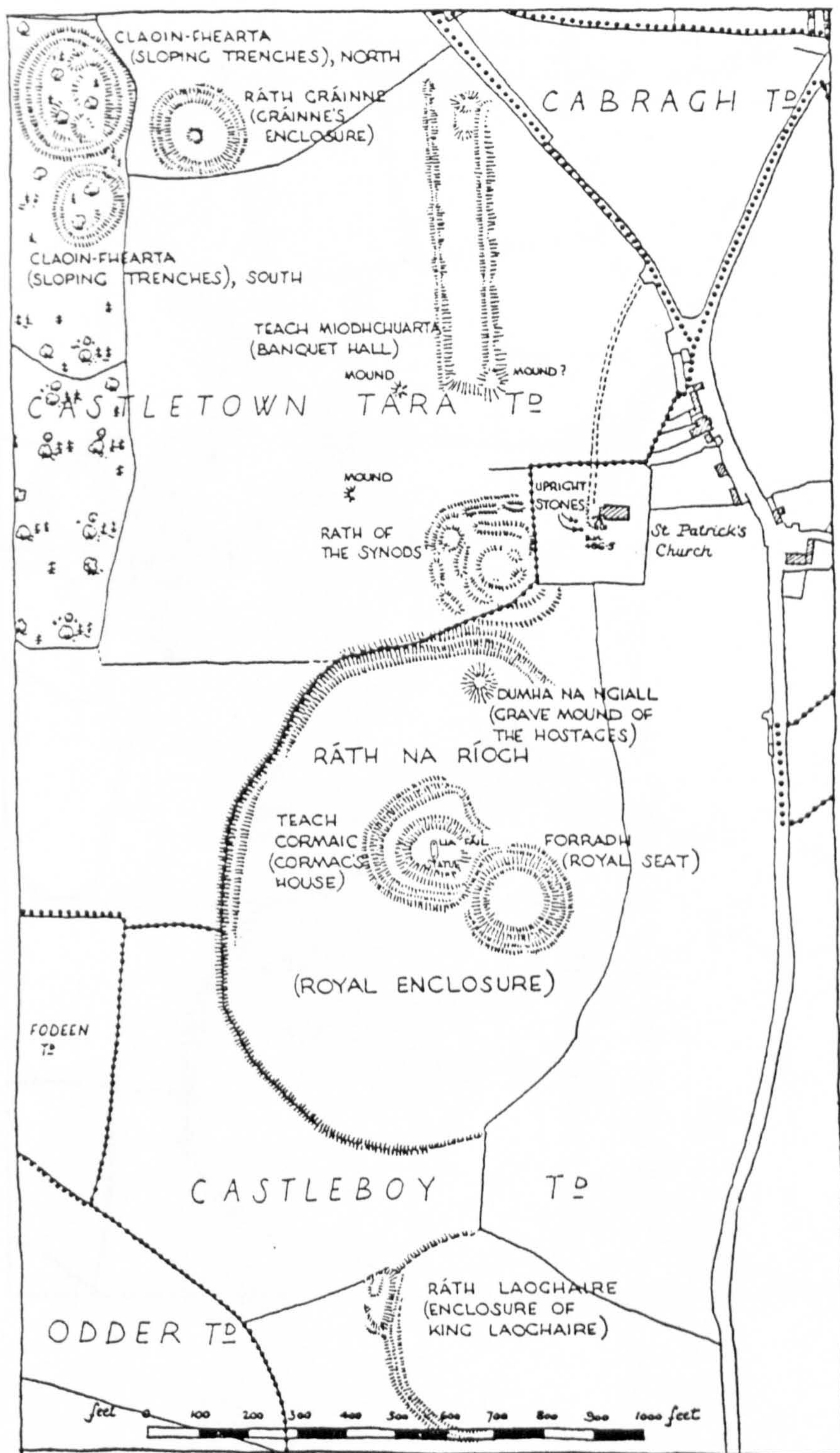


Fig 7. Plan of the Hill of Tara, Co Meath.

(From Ó Ríordáin 1965: frontis).



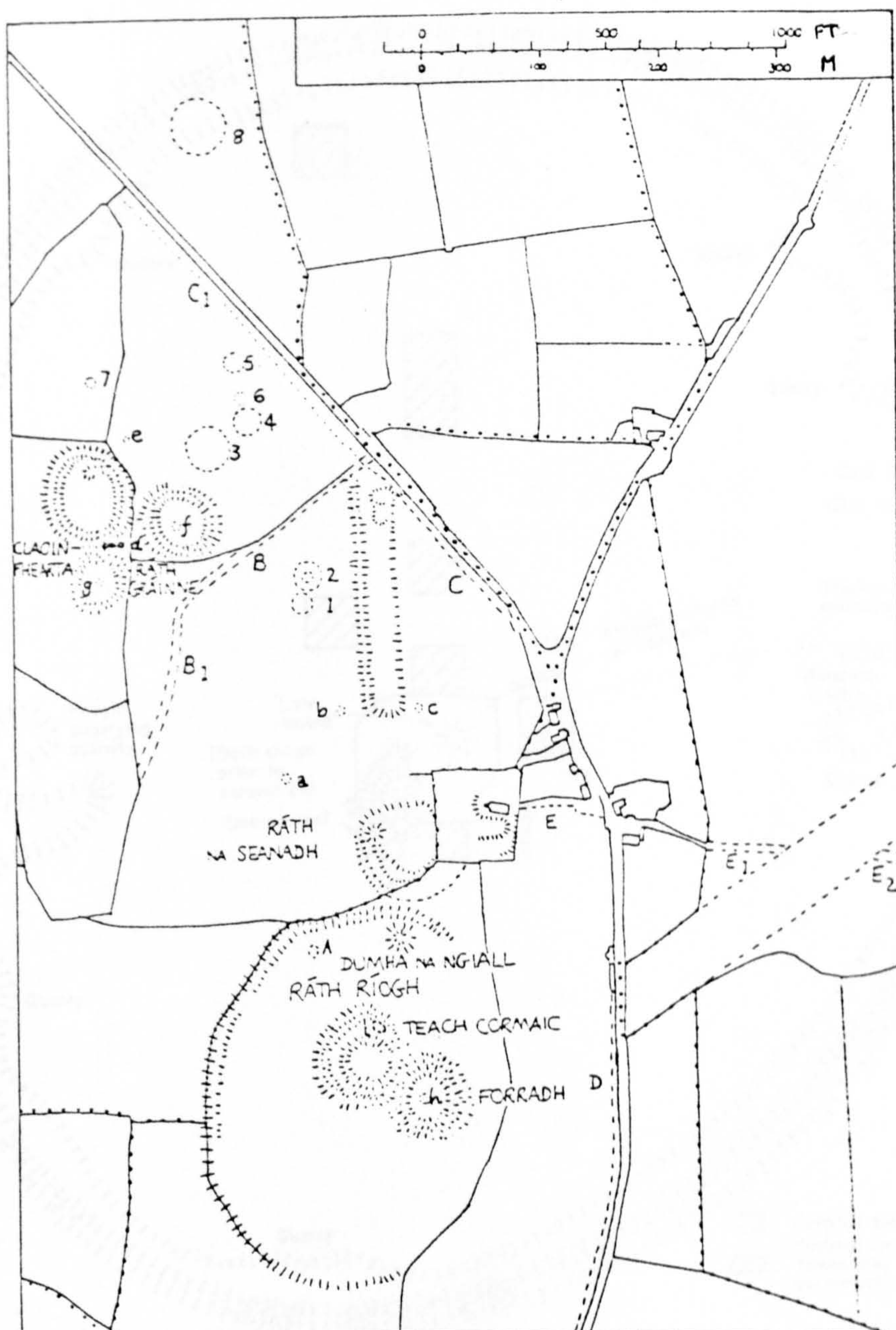


Fig 8. Plan of the Hill of Tara, Co Meath, showing features revealed on aerial photographs. (From Swan 1978:55, fig 16).



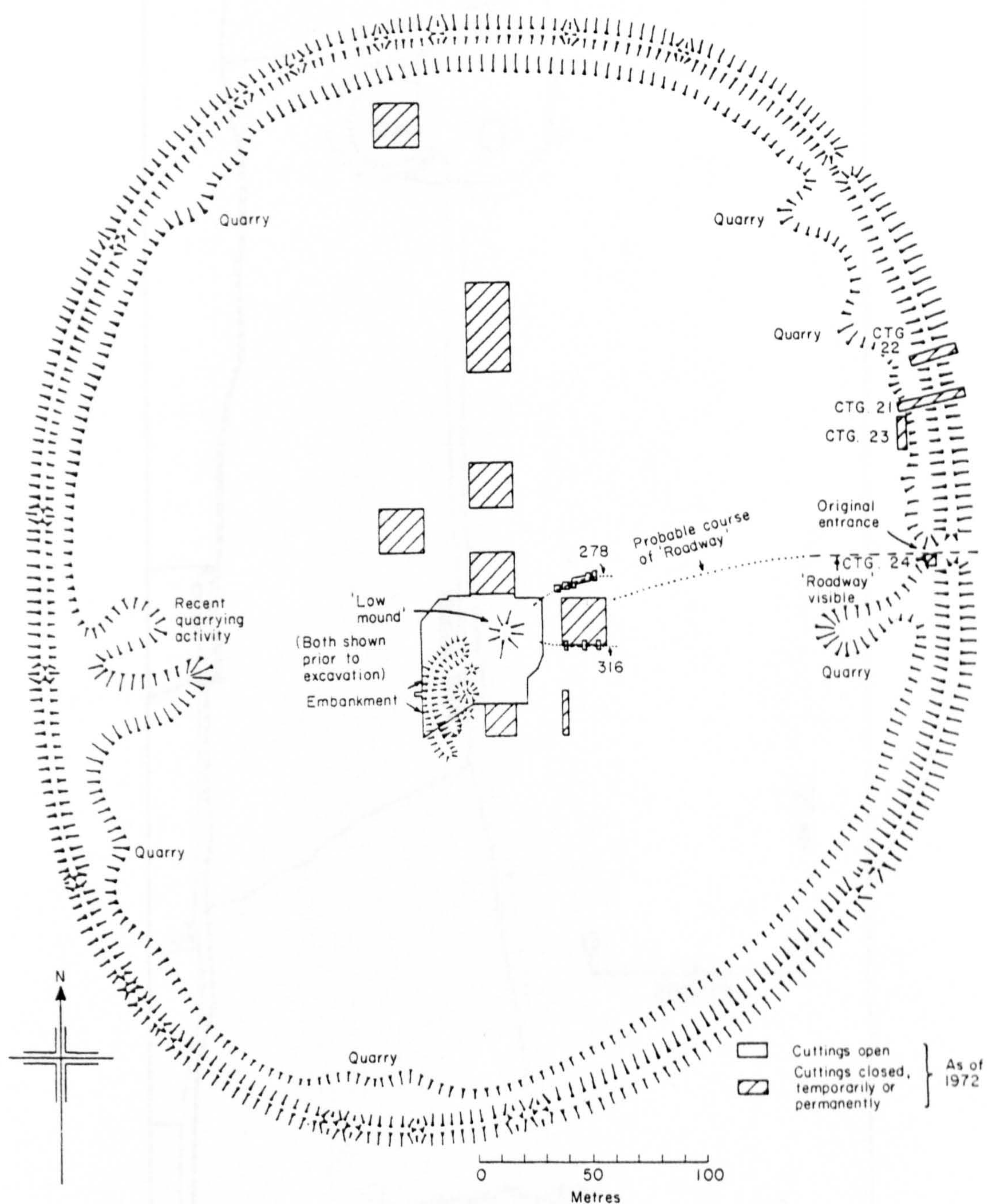


Fig 9. Plan of Knockaulin, Co Kildare. (From Wailes 1976:474).



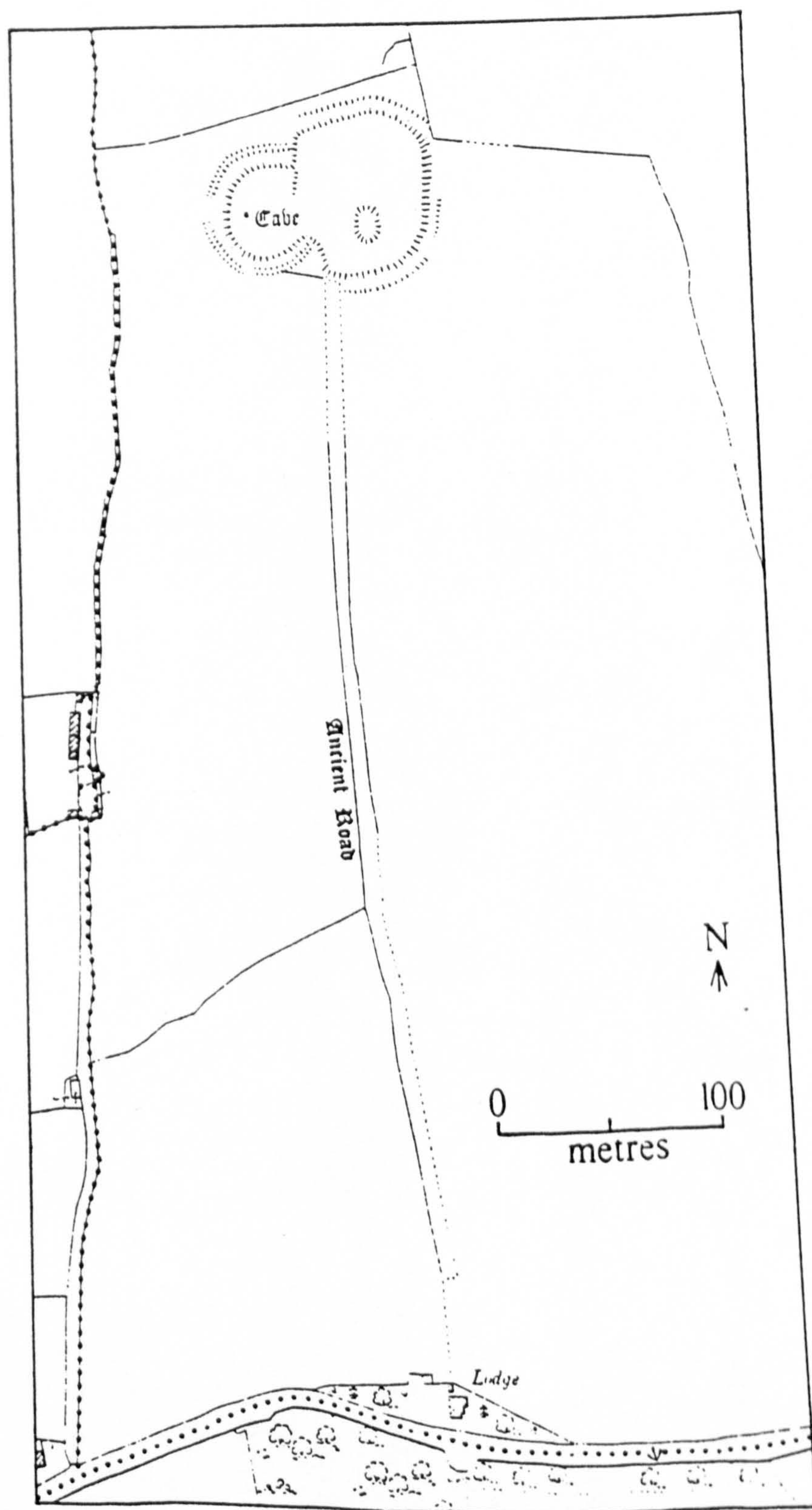


Fig 10. Plan of Uisneach, Co Westmeath. (From Wailes 1982:29).



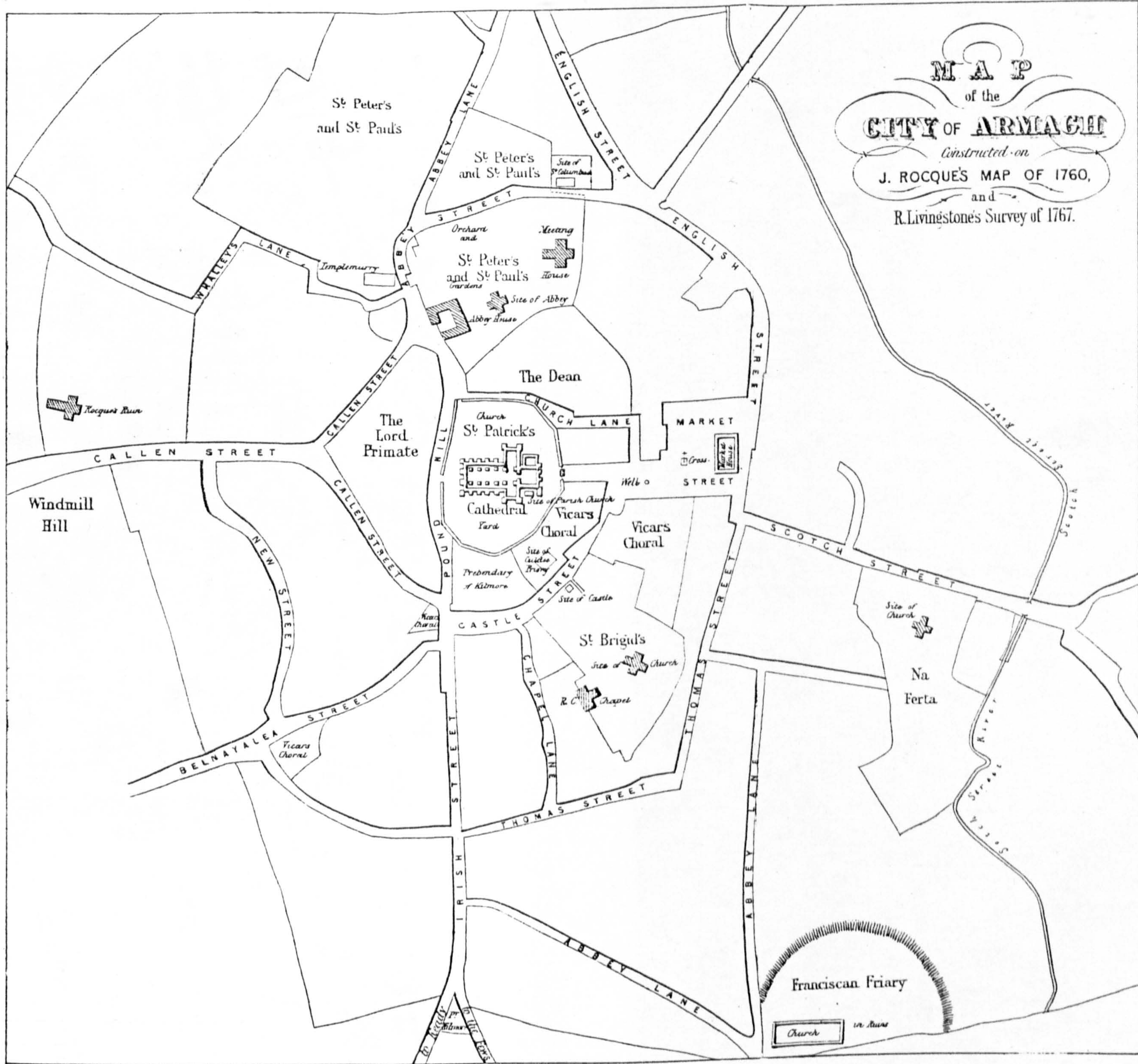


Fig 11. Rocque's map of Armagh city (1760). (From Reeves 1860).



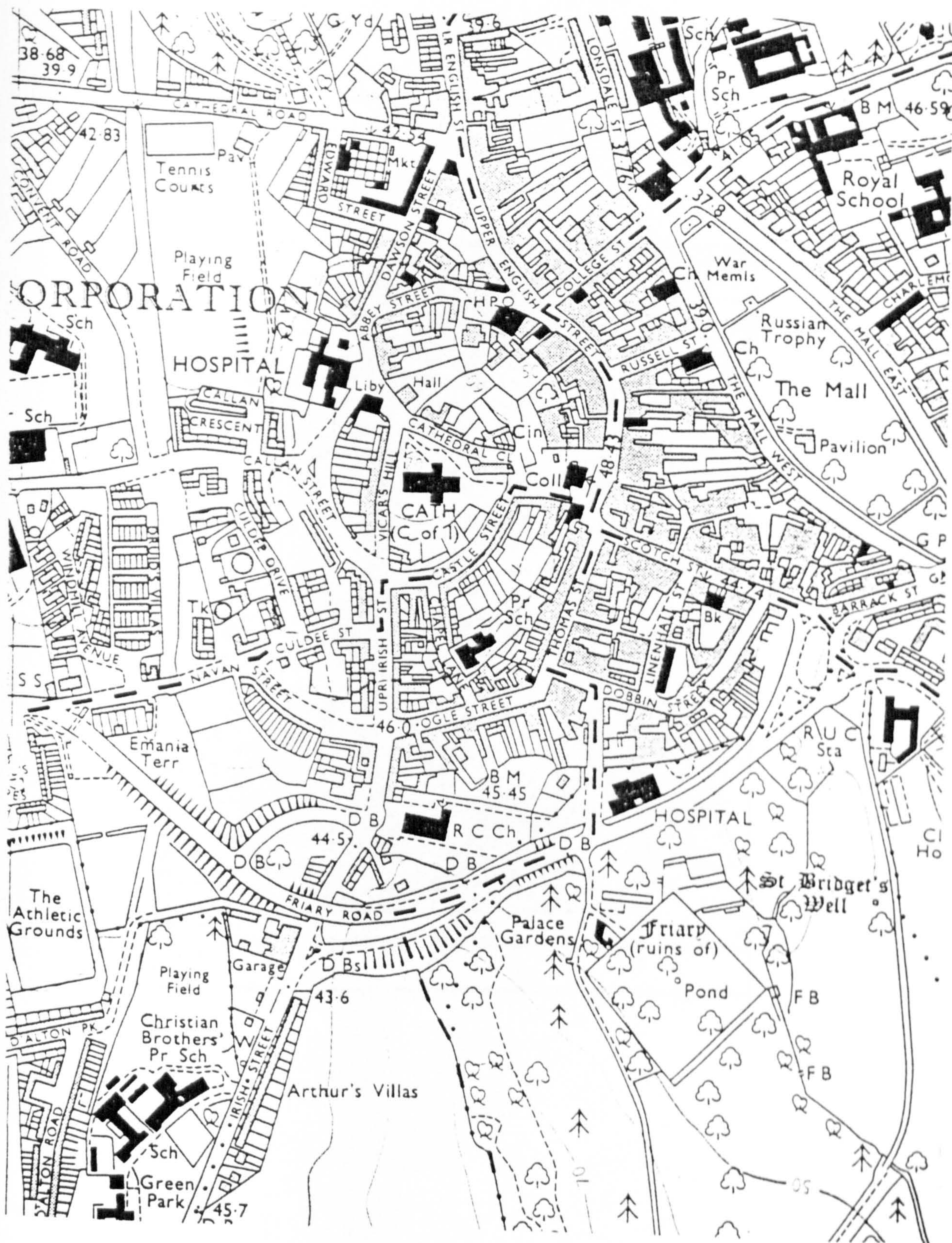


Fig 12. The modern street-plan of Armagh.



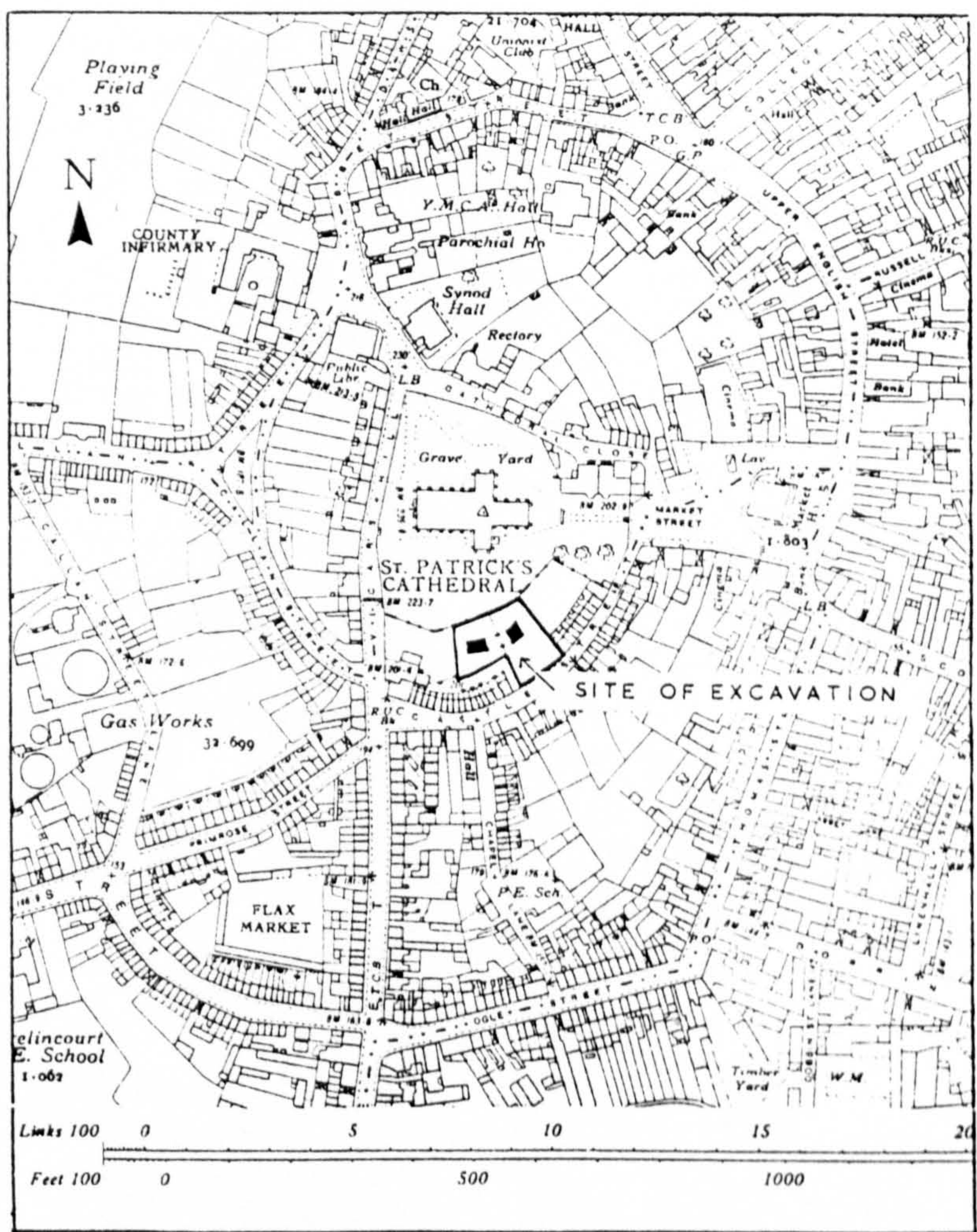


Fig 13. The modern street-plan of Armagh, showing the location of the excavations on Cathedral Hill. (From Brown and Harper 1985:111).



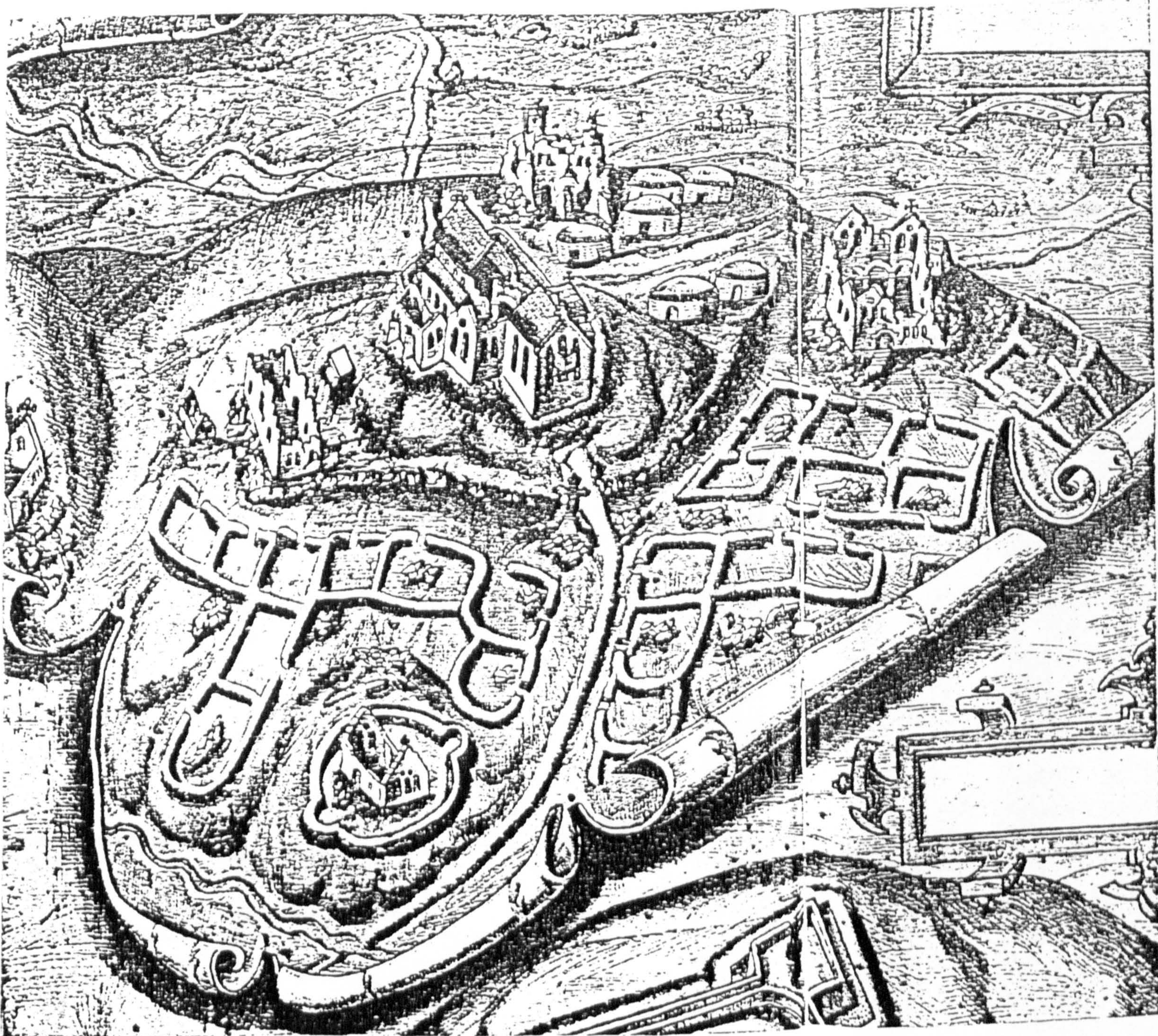


Fig 14. Bartlett's (1601/02) map of Armagh. The Cathedral is in the centre, with Archbishop's Court behind it. The Priory of SS Peter and Paul lies to the right of the cathedral, and what appears to be the *Celi De* priory to its left. On the far left is what may be the Church of St Brigit. *Tempul na Ferta* lies in the foreground. A high cross is clearly visible beside the eastern entrance to the enclosure within which the cathedral is located.



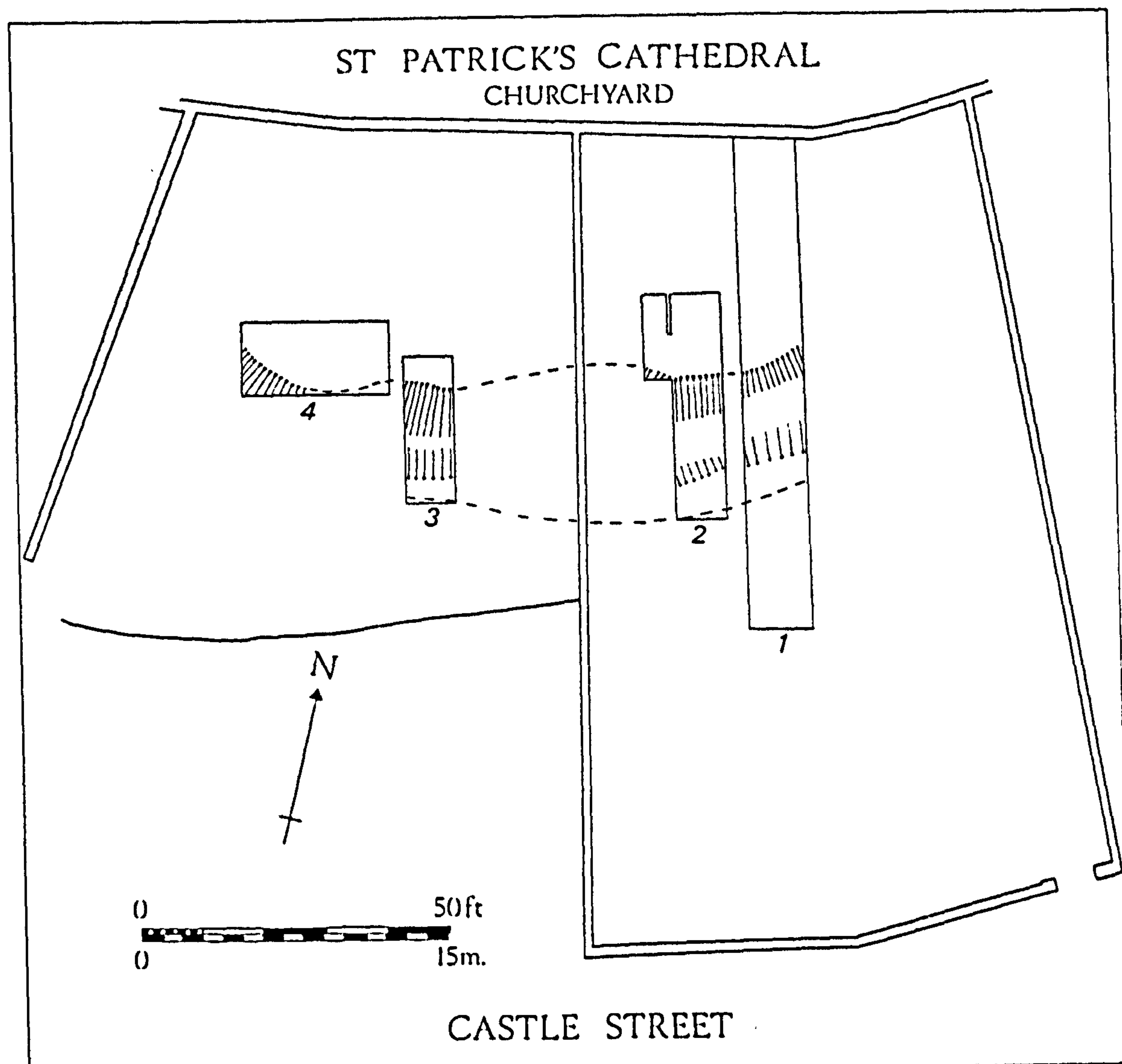


Fig 15. Cathedral Hill, Armagh. The location of the excavation trenches and the position of the ditch. (From Brown and Harper 1985:114).



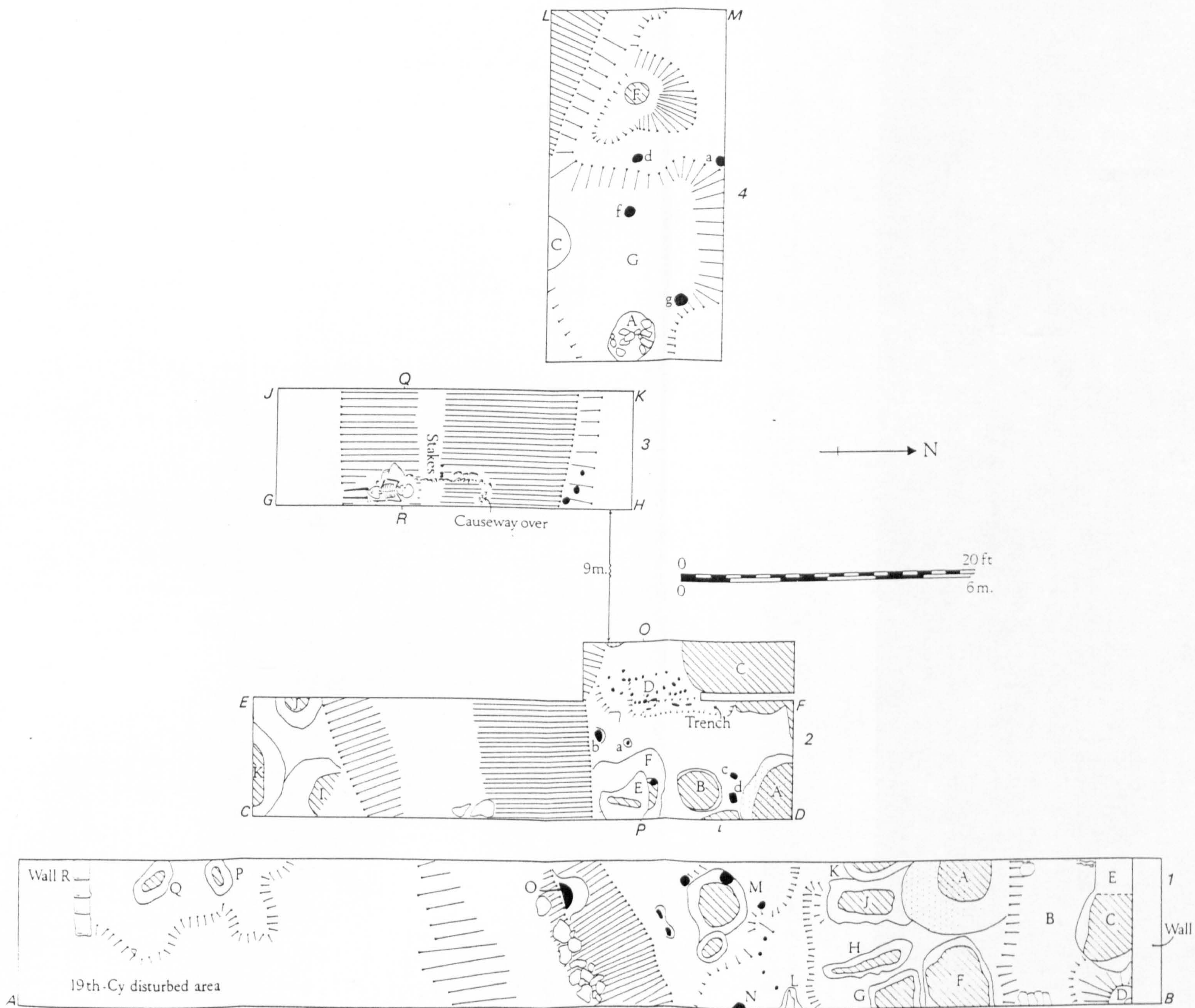


Fig 16. Cathedral Hill, Armagh. Plan of the excavated trenches.

(From Brown and Harper 1985: fig 4, facing p 118).



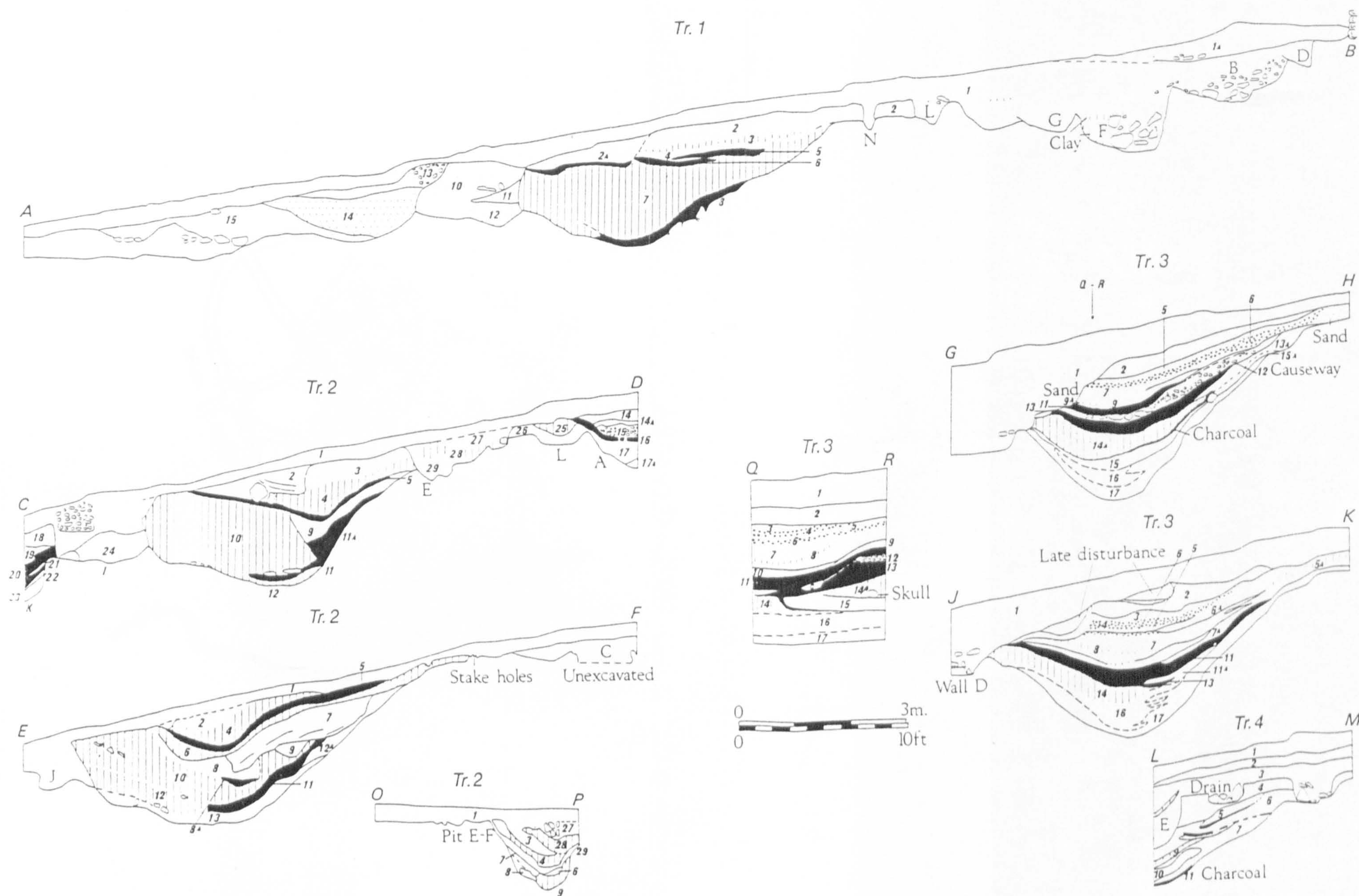


Fig 17. Cathedral Hill, Armagh. The trench sections.

(From Brown and Harper 1985: fig 5, facing p 120).

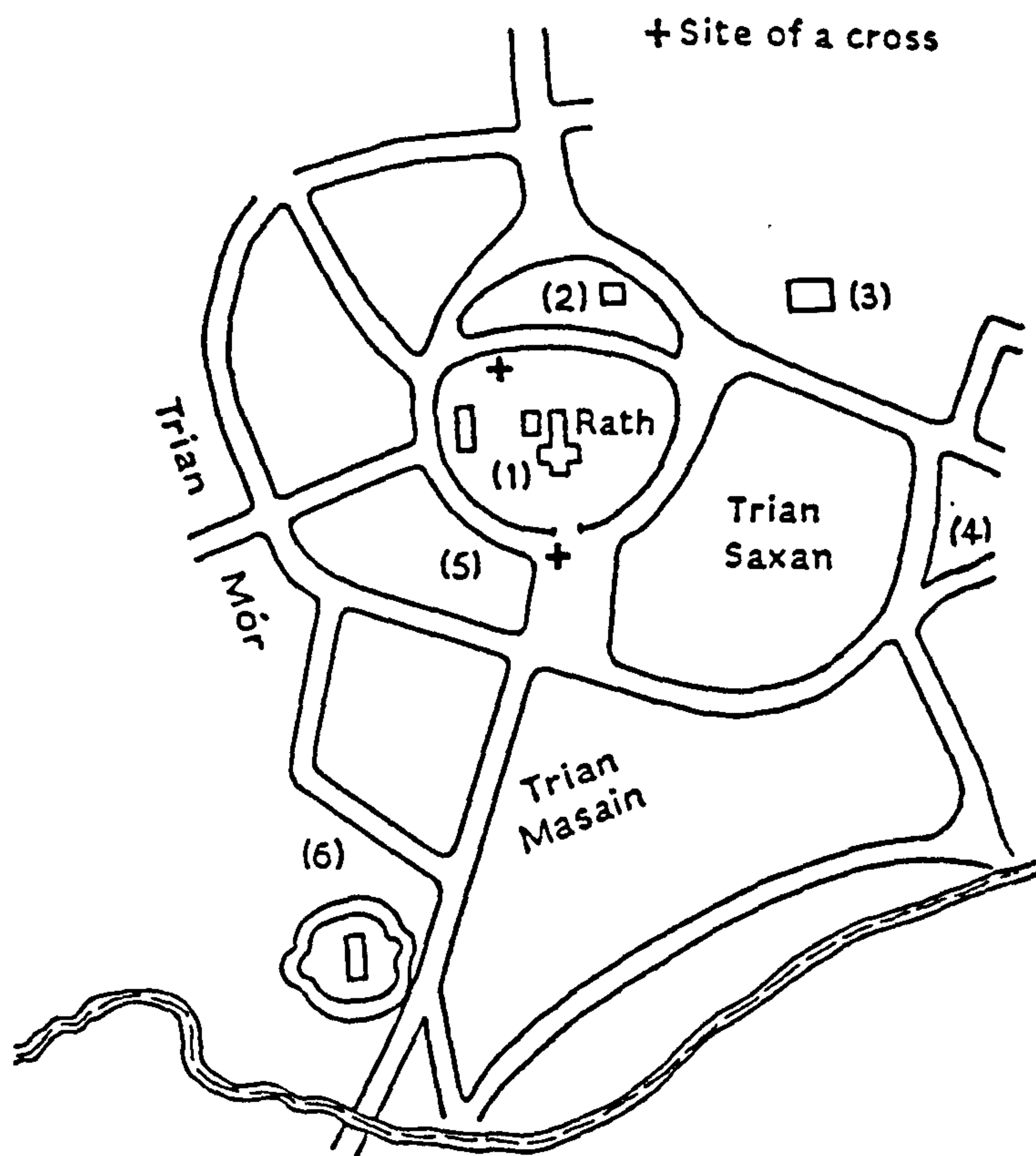


Fig 18. Henry's (1967: fig 2) interpretative plan of the spatial organization of early historic Armagh. 1. Cathedral; 2. Abbot's house; 3. Priory of SS Peter and Paul; 4. Church of St Columba; 5. Church of St Brigit; 6. *Na Ferta* (Church of the Relics).



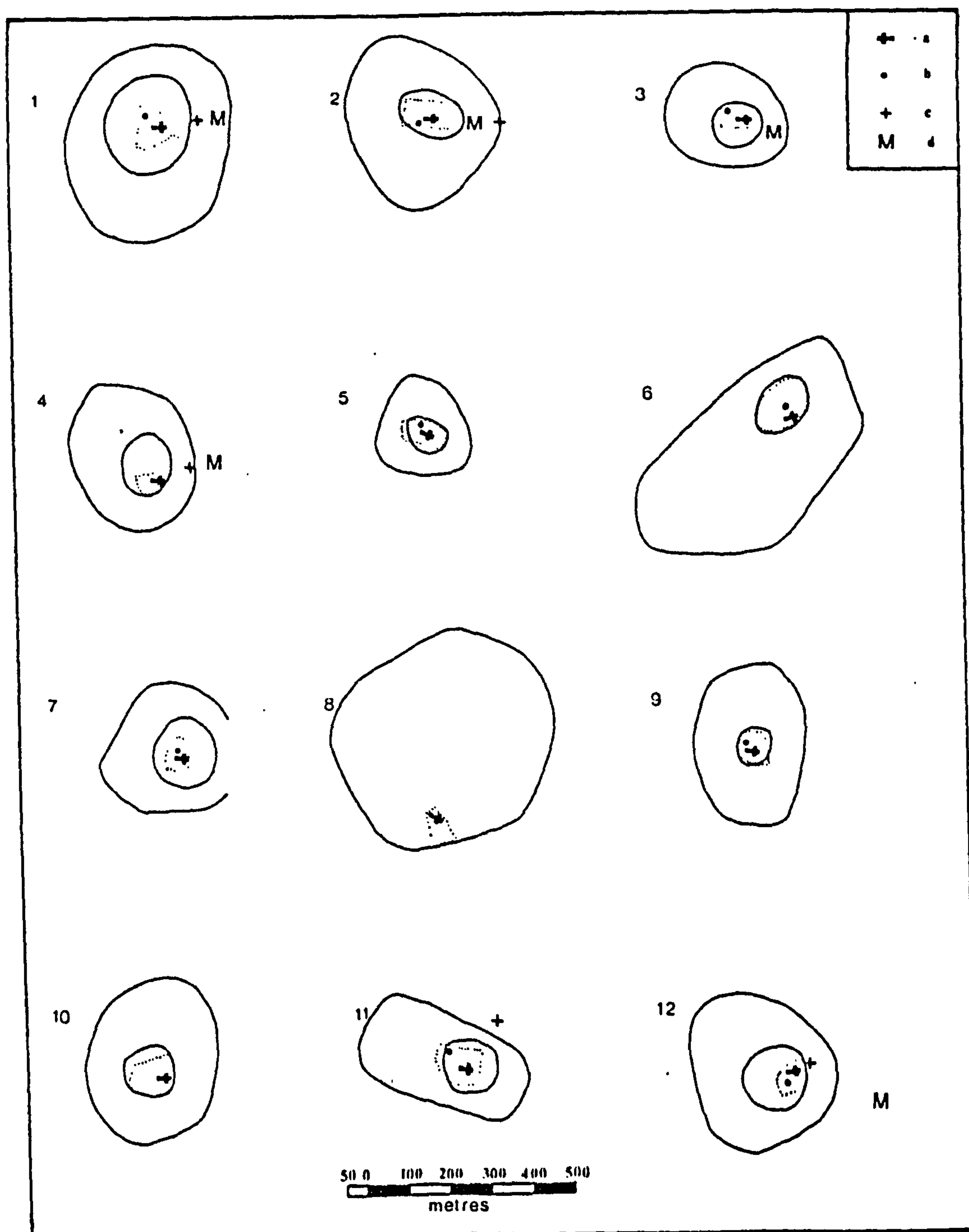


Fig 19. Swan's (1985:98, fig 4.16) proposed reconstructions of the enclosures of twelve of the larger ecclesiastical settlements of early historic Ireland. 1. Armagh; 2. Kells; 3. Kildare; 4. Tuam; 5. Lusk; 6. Cashel; 7. Killlala; 8. Finglas; 9. Monasterboice; 10. Lorrha; 11. Glendalough; 12. Downpatrick. Key: a. church or church site; b. round tower; c. market or town cross; d. market house/place/square/street.

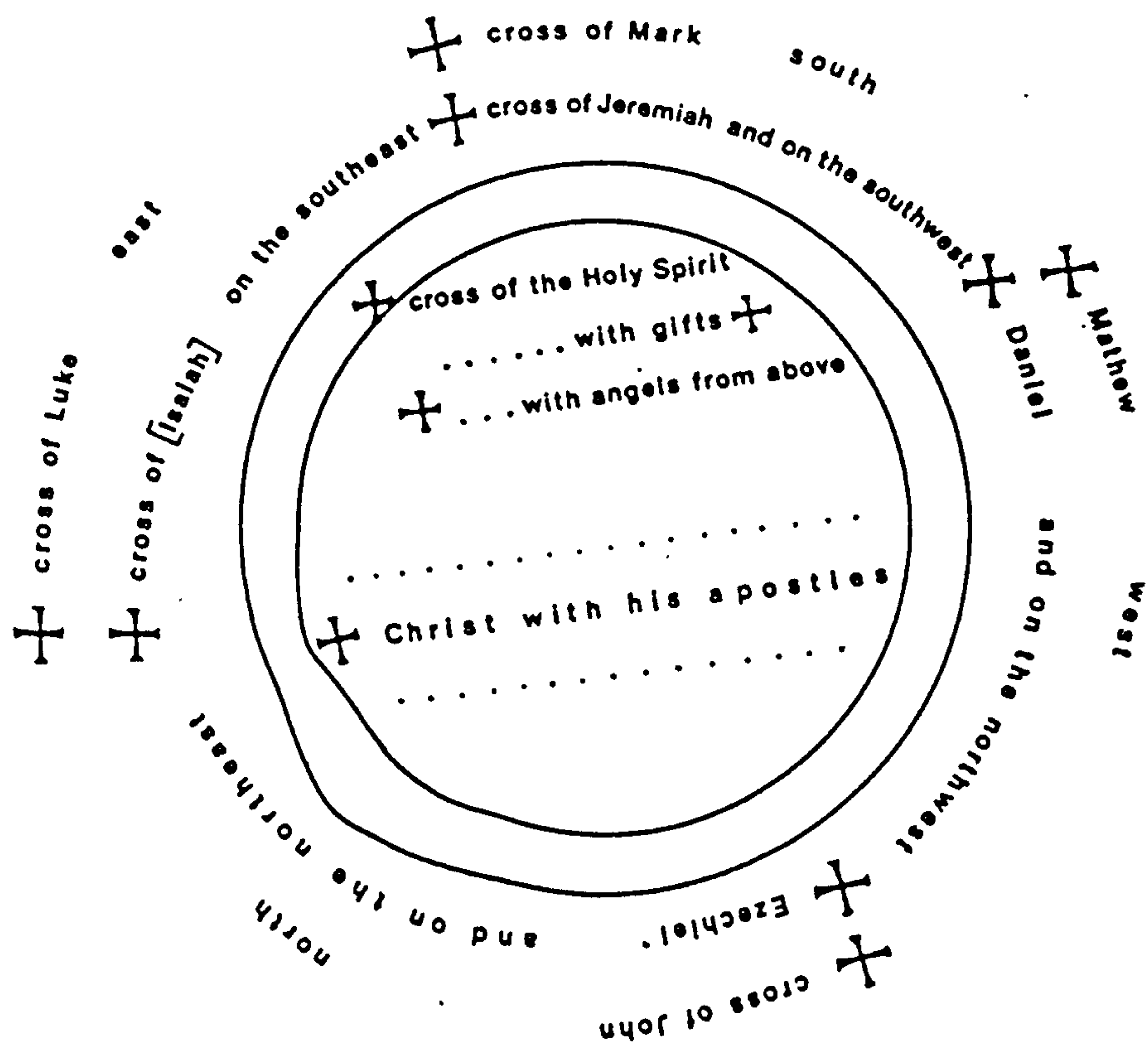
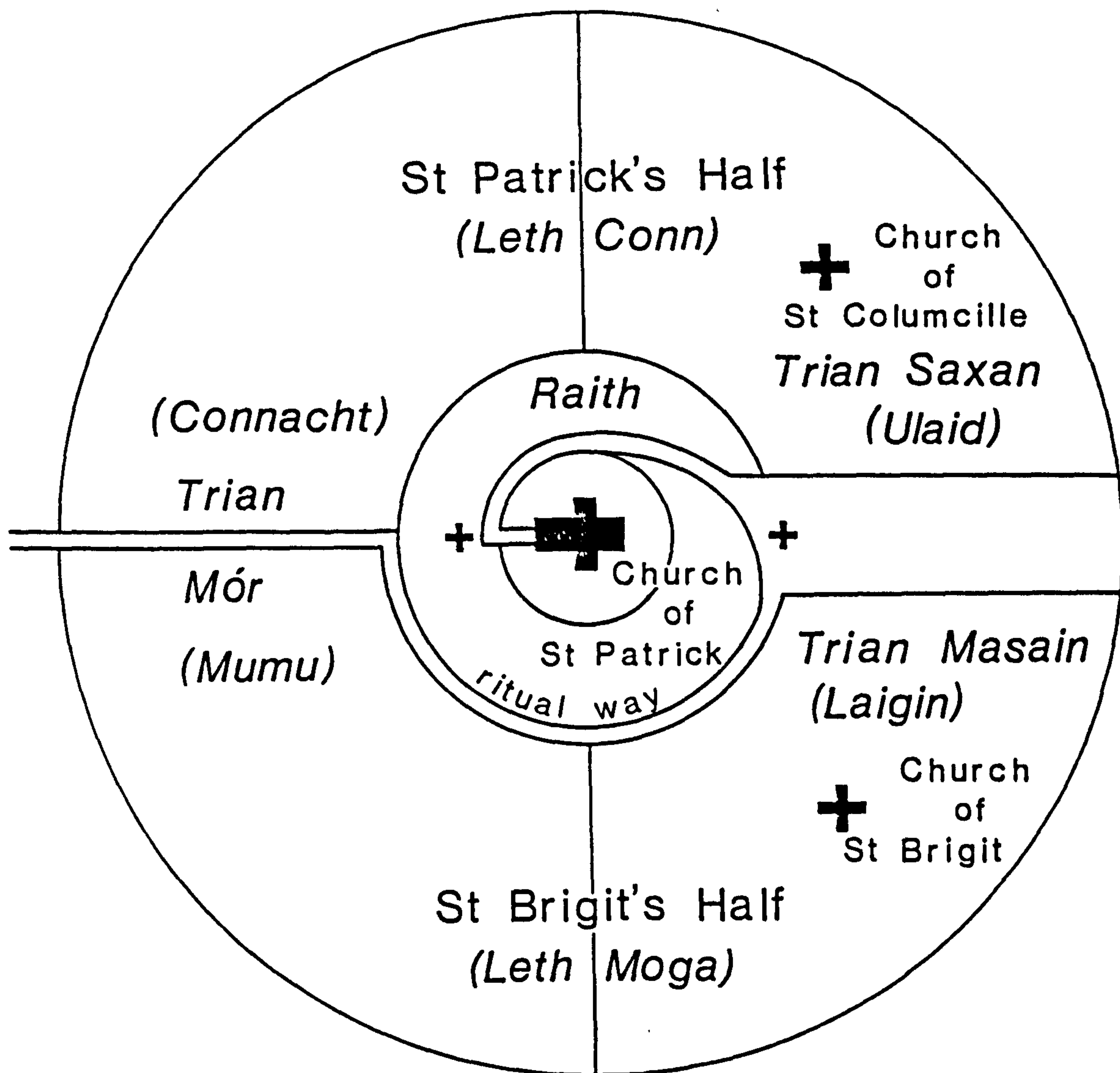


Fig 20. A transcription of the colophon drawing from the Book of Mulling (Trinity College, Dublin, MS 60, fol 94v).

(From Nees 1983:69, fig 1).





+ high cross, site of

Fig 21. An idealized representation of the spatial and symbolic organization of early historic Armagh, giving the identification of the spatial units within the city and (in parentheses) their cosmological correlates.